VERNER'S PRIDE

MRS HENRY WOOD

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VERNER'S PRIDE

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VERNER'S PRIDE

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF

"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW," ETC.

TWO HUNDRED AND THIRD THOUSAND

THE ONLY AUTHORIZED AND COMPLETE EDITION

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VERNER'S PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

RACHEL FROST.

THE rays of the afternoon sun, drawing towards the horizon, fell on a fair scene of country life; flickered through the young foliage of the oak and lime-trees, touched the budding hedges, rested on the growing grass, all lovely in their early green, and lighted up the windows of the fine mansion, that, rising on a gentle eminence, looked down on that fair scene as if it were its master, and could boast the ownership of those broad lands, of those glinting trees.

Not that the house possessed attraction for those whose taste inclined to the antique. No time-worn turrets were there, or gabled ends, or crooked eaves, or mullioned Gothic casements. Neither was the edifice constructed of grey stone, or of bricks toned down with age. It was a handsome, well-built white mansion, giving promise of excellent rooms within, whose chimneys never smoked or windows rattled, and where there was sufficient space to turn in. The lower windows opened on a gravelled terrace, which ran the whole length of the house, a broad flight of steps descending from its centre. Lawns, gently sloping, extended from the terrace, on either side the steps and the broad walk which branched from them; lawns gay with parterres of flowers already scenting the air, and giving promise of the advancing summer. Beyond, were covered walks, yielding a shelter from the sultry noontide sun; shrubberies and labyrinths of intricate turnings and windings, suggestive of secret meetings, were secret meetings desirable; groves of scented shrubs; cascades and rippling fountains; mossy dells, concealing the sweet primrose, the sweeter violet; and verdant spots open to the country round, the charming distant scenery. These open places were supplied with benches, where you might sit and feast the eyes upon the exquisite views through the livelong summer day.

It was not summer yet—scarcely spring—and the sun, I say, was drawing to its setting, lighting up the large clear windows as with burnished gold. The house, the grounds, the surrounding estate,

all belonged to Mr. Verner. It had come to him by bequest, not by entailed inheritance. Busybodies were fond of saying that it never ought to have been his; that if the strict law of right and justice had been observed, it would have gone to his elder brother; or, rather, to that elder brother's son. Old Mr. Verner, the father of these two brothers, had been a modest country gentleman, until one morning when he awoke to the news that valuable mines had been discovered on his land. The mines brought him wealth, and in his later years he purchased this estate, pulled down the house that was upon it—a high, narrow old tenement, looking like a crazy tower or a capacious belfry—and had erected this one, calling it "Verner's Pride."

An appropriate name. For if ever a poor human creature was proud of a house he has builded, old Mr. Verner was proud of his—proud to folly. He lavished money upon it; he made its grounds beautiful and seductive as a scene in fairyland; and he ended by leaving it to the younger of his two sons.

These two sons comprised all his family. The elder had gone into the army early, and left for India; the younger had remained always with his father, helping him to make money, sharing in the planning and building of Verner's Pride, living there with him after it was built. The elder son—Captain Verner then—paid one visit only to England, during which visit he married, and took his wife out with him when he went back. These long separations, however much we may feel inclined to ignore the fact, do play strange havoc with home affections, wearing them away inch by inch.

The years went on and on. Captain Verner became Colonel Sir Lionel Verner, and a boy of his had been sent home in due course, and was at Eton. Old Mr. Verner drew near to death. News went out to India that his days were numbered, and Sir Lionel Verner was requested to obtain leave of absence, if possible, and start for home without a day's delay, if he would see his father alive. "If possible," you observe, they added to the request; for the Sikhs were at that time giving trouble in our Indian possessions, and Colonel Verner was one of the experienced officers least likely to be spared.

But there is a mandate that must be obeyed whenever it comes to us—grim, imperative death. At the very hour when Mr. Verner was summoning his son to his death-bed, at the precise time that the military authorities in India would have said, if asked, that Colonel Sir Lionel Verner could *not* be spared, death had marked out that brave officer for his own especial prey. He fell in one of the skirmishes that took place near Moultan, and the two letters—one going to Europe with tidings of his death, the other going to

India with news of his father's illness—crossed each other on the route.

"Steevy," said old Mr. Verner to his younger son, after giving a passing lament to Sir Lionel, "I shall leave Verner's Pride to you."

"Ought it not to go to the lad at Eton, father?" was the reply of Stephen Verner.

"What's the lad at Eton to me?" cried the old man. "I would not have left it away from Lionel, as he was my firstborn; but it has always seemed to me that you had more right to it; that to leave it away from you savoured of injustice. You helped to build it, Steevy; it has been your home as much as it has been mine; and I'll never turn you from it for a stranger, let him be whose child he may. No, no! Verner's Pride shall be yours. But, look you, Stephen! you have no children; bring up young Lionel as your heir, and let it descend to him after you."

And that is how Stephen Verner had inherited Verner's Pride. Neighbouring gossipers, ever fonder of laying down the law for other people's business than of minding their own, protested against it amongst themselves as a piece of injustice. Had they cause to do so? Many very just-minded persons would consider that Stephen Verner possessed a fairer claim to it than the boy at Eton.

I will tell you of one who did not think so. And that was the widow of Sir Lionel Verner. When she arrived from India with her other two children, a son and daughter, she found old Mr. Verner dead, and Stephen the inheritor. Deeply annoyed and disappointed, Lady Verner deemed that a crying wrong had been perpetrated upon her and hers. But she had no power to alter it.

Stephen Verner had strictly fulfilled his father's injunctions touching young Lionel. He brought up the boy as his heir. During his days at Eton and at college, Verner's Pride was his home, and he subsequently took up his permanent residence there. Stephen Verner, though long married, had no children. One daughter had been born to him years ago, but had passed away when three or four years old. His wife had died a very short time after the death of his father. He afterwards married again, a widow named Massingbird, who had two nearly grown-up sons. She had brought her sons home with her to Verner's Pride, and they had made it their home ever since.

Mr. Verner kept it no secret that his nephew Lionel was to be his heir; and, as such, Lionel was universally regarded on the estate. "Always provided that you merit it," Mr. Verner would say to Lionel in private; and so he had said to him from the very first. "Be what you ought to be—what I fondly believe my brother Lionel was: a man of goodness, of honour, of integrity; a *gentleman*

and a Christian in the highest acceptation of the terms—and Verner's Pride shall undoubtedly be yours. But if I find you forget your fair conduct, and forfeit the esteem of good men, so surely will I leave it away from you."

And now, after these few words of introduction, we must return to the light of that spring evening.

Ascending the broad flight of steps and crossing the terrace, the house door is entered. A spacious hall, paved with delicately-grained marble, its windows mellowed by the soft tints of stained glass, gives entrance to reception rooms on either side. Those to the right are chiefly reserved for state occasions; those on the left are dedicated to everyday life and use. All these rooms are just now empty of occupants, one excepted. That one is a small room on the right, behind the two great drawing-rooms, and it looks out to the side of the house towards the south. It is called "Mr. Verner's study." And in it sits Mr. Verner himself, leaning back in his chair and reading. A large fire burns in the grate, and he is sitting over it: for he is always chilly.

Ay, always chilly. For Mr. Verner's last illness—at least, what will in all probability prove his last; his ending—has already taken possession of him. One generation passes away after another. It seems only the other day that a last illness seized his father, and now his own turn has come: but several years have elapsed since then. Mr. Verner is not sixty, and he thinks that age is young for the disorder that has fastened upon him. It is no impatient disorder; he may live for years yet; but the end, when it does come, will be tolerably sudden; and that he knows. It is water on the chest. He is a little man with light eyes; very much what his father was before him. but not in the least like his late brother Sir Lionel, who was a fine, handsome man. He has a mild, pleasing countenance: but there comes a slight scowl to his brow as he turns hastily at a noisy interruption.

Some one had burst into the room—forgetting, probably, that it was the quiet room of an invalid. A tall, dark young man, with broad shoulders and a somewhat peculiar stoop in them. His hair was black, his complexion sallow; but his features were good. He might have been called handsome, but for a strange, very ugly mark upon his cheek. A very strange mark indeed, as large as a pigeon's egg, with what looked like radii shooting from it on all sides. Some of the villagers, talking familiarly among themselves, would call it a hedgehog, some would call it a "porkypine;" but it resembled a star-fish as much as anything. That is, if you can imagine a black star-fish. The mark was black as jet; and his pale cheek, and the fact of his possessing no whiskers, made it the more conspicuous. He was born with the mark; and his mother used to say—— But

that is of no consequence to us. It was Frederick Massingbird, the present Mrs. Verner's younger son.

"Roy has come up, sir," said he, addressing Mr. Verner. "He says the Dawsons have turned obstinate and won't go out. They have barricaded the door, and protest that they'll stay, in spite of him. He wishes to know if he shall use force."

"No," said Mr. Verner. "I don't like harsh measures resorted to, and I will not have them attempted. Roy knows that."

"Well, sir, he waits your orders. He says there's half the village collected round Dawson's door. The place is in a regular commotion."

Mr. Verner looked vexed. Of late years he had declined active management on his estate; and, since he grew ill, he particularly disliked being disturbed with details. "Where's Lionel?" he asked peevishly.

"I saw Lionel ride out an hour ago. I don't know where he has gone."

"Tell Roy to let the affair rest until to-morrow, when Lionel will see to it. And, Frederick, I wish you would remember that a little noise disturbs me: try to come in more quietly. You burst in as if my nerves were as strong as your own."

Mr. Verner turned to his fire again with an air of relief, glad to have got rid of the trouble in some way, and Frederick Massingbird proceeded to what was called the steward's room, where Roy waited. This Roy, a hard-looking man with a face very much seamed with small-pox, was working-bailiff to Mr. Verner. Until within a few years he had been a labourer on the estate. He was not liked among the poorer tenants, and was generally honoured with the appellation of "Old Grips," or "Grip Roy."

"Roy," said Frederick Massingbird, "Mr. Verner says it is to be left until to-morrow morning. Mr. Lionel will see about it then. He is out at present."

"And let the mob have it all their own way to-night?" returned Roy, angrily. "They be in a state of mutiny; saying everything they can lay their tongues to."

"Let them say it," responded Frederick Massingbird. "Leave them alone, and they'll disperse quietly enough. I shall not go in to Mr. Verner again, Roy. I caught it now for disturbing him. You must let it rest until you can see Mr. Lionel."

The bailiff went off, growling. He would have liked to receive *carte blanche* for dealing with the mob—as he was pleased to term them—between whom and himself there was no love lost. As he was crossing a paved yard at the back of the house, some one came hastily out of the laundry in the detached premises at the side, and crossed his path.

A very beautiful girl. Her features were delicate, her complexion was fair as alabaster, and a bright colour mantled in her cheeks. But for the modest cap upon her head, a stranger might have been puzzled to guess her condition in life. She looked gentle and refined as any lady, and her manners and speech would not have destroyed the illusion. She might be called a protégée of the house, as will be explained presently; but she acted as maid to Mrs. Verner. The bright colour deepened to a glow when she saw the bailiff.

He put out his hand and stopped her. "Well, Rachel, how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you," she answered, endeavouring to pass on. But he would not suffer it.

"I say, I want to come to the bottom of this business between you and Luke," he said, lowering his voice. "What's the rights of it?"

"Between me and Luke?" she repeated, turning upon the bailiff an eye that had some scorn in it, and stopping now of her own accord. "There is no business whatever between me and Luke. There never has been. What do you mean?"

"Chut!" cried the bailiff. "Don't I know that he has followed your steps everywhere like a shadder; that he has been ready to kiss the very ground you trod on? And right mad I have been with him for it. You can't deny that he has been after you, wanting you to be his wife."

"I do not wish to deny it," she replied. "You and the whole world are quite welcome to know all that has passed between me and Luke. He asked to be allowed to come here to see me—to 'court' me, as he phrased it; which I distinctly declined. Then he took to following me about. He did not molest me, he was not rude—I do not wish to make it out worse than it was—but it is not pleasant, Mr. Roy, to be followed whenever you may take a walk. Especially by one you dislike."

"What is there to dislike in Luke?" demanded the bailiff.

"Perhaps I ought to have said by one you do not like," she resumed. "To like Luke in the way he wished, was impossible for me, and I told him so from the first. When I found that he dodged my steps, I spoke to him again, and threatened that I should acquaint Mr. Verner. I told him so, once for all, that I could not like him, that I never would have him; and since then he has kept his distance. That is all that has ever passed between me and Luke."

"Well, your hard-heartedness has done for him, Rachel Frost. It has driven him away from his native home, and sent him, an exile, to rough it in foreign lands. You may fix upon one as won't do for you and be your slave as Luke would. He could have kept you well."

"I heard he had gone to London," she remarked.

"London!" returned the bailiff, slightingly. "That's only the first halt on the journey. And you have driven him to it!"

"I can't help it," she replied, turning to the house. "I had no liking for him, and I could not force it. I don't believe he has gone away for that trifling reason, Mr. Roy. If he has, he must be very foolish."

"Yes, he is foolish," muttered the bailiff to himself as he strode away. "He's an idiot, that's what he is! and so be all men that lose their wits sighing after a girl. Vain, deceitful, fickle creatures, girls be when they're young; but once let them get a hold on you, your ring on their finger, and they turn into vixenish, snarling women! Luke's a sight best off without her."

Rachel Frost proceeded indoors. The door of the steward's room stood open, and she turned into it, fancying it was empty. Down on a chair sat she, a marked change coming over her air and manner. Her bright colour had faded, her hands hung down listlessly, and there was an expression on her face of care and perplexity. Suddenly she lifted her hands and struck her temples, with a gesture that looked very like despair.

"What ails you, Rachel?"

The question came from Frederick Massingbird, who had been standing at the window behind the high desk, unobserved by Rachel. Violently startled, she sprang up from her seat, her face glowing, and muttered some disjointed words, to the effect that she did not know any one was there.

"What were you and Roy discussing so eagerly in the yard?" continued Frederick Massingbird. But the words had scarcely escaped his lips, when the housekeeper, Mrs. Tynn, entered the room. She had a mottled face and mottled arms, and her sleeves just now were turned up.

"It was nothing particular, Mr. Frederick," replied Rachel.

"Roy is gone, is he not?" he continued to Rachel.

"Yes, sir."

"Rachel," interposed the housekeeper, "are those things not ready yet, in the laundry?"

"Not quite. In a quarter-of-an-hour, they say."

The housekeeper, with a word of impatience at the laundry's delay, went out and crossed the yard towards it. Frederick Massingbird turned again to Rachel.

"Roy seemed to be grumbling at you."

"He accused me of being the cause of his son's going away. He thinks I ought to have noticed him."

Frederick Massingbird made no reply. He raised his finger and gently rubbed it round and round the mark upon his cheek: a habit he had acquired when a child, and they could not entirely break

him of it. He was seven-and-twenty years of age now, but he was sure to begin rubbing that mark unconsciously, if in deep thought. Rachel resumed, her tone a covert one, as if the subject on which she was about to speak might not be breathed, even to the walls.

"Roy hinted that his son was going to foreign lands. I did not choose to let him see that I knew anything, so remarked that I had heard he was gone to London. 'London!' he answered: 'that was only the first halt on the journey!'"

"Did he give any hint about John?"

"Not a word," replied Rachel. "He would not be likely to do that."

"No. Roy can keep counsel, whatever other virtues he may run short of. Suppose you had joined your fortunes to sighing Luke's, Rachel, and gone out with him to grow rich together?" added Frederick Massingbird, in a tone which could be taken for either jest or earnest.

She evidently took it as the latter, and it appeared to call up an angry spirit. She was vexed almost to tears. Frederick Massingbird detected it.

"Silly Rachel!" he said, with a smile. "Do you suppose I should really counsel your throwing yourself away upon Luke Roy? —Rachel," he continued, as the housekeeper again made her appearance, "you must bring up the things as soon as they are ready. My brother is waiting for them."

"I'll bring them up, sir," replied Rachel.

Frederick Massingbird passed through the passages to the hall, and then proceeded upstairs to the bedroom occupied by his brother. A sufficiently spacious room for all ordinary purposes, but it did not look half large enough now for the litter that was in it. Wardrobes and drawers were standing open, their contents half out, half in; chairs, tables, bed, were strewed; boxes and portmanteaus were gaping open on the floor. John Massingbird, the elder brother, was stowing away some of this litter into the boxes; not all sixes and sevens, as it looked where it lay, but compactly and artistically. John Massingbird possessed a ready hand at packing and arranging; and therefore he preferred doing it himself to deputing it to others. He was one year older than his brother, and there was a great likeness between them in figure and in feature. Not in expression: in that, they were widely different. They were about the same height, and there was the same stoop observable in the shoulders; the features also were similar in cast, and sallow in hue; the same black eyes and hair. John had large whiskers, otherwise the likeness would have been more striking: and his face was not disfigured by the strange black mark. He was the better-looking of the two: his face wore an easy, good-natured, free ex-

pression; whilst Frederick's was cold and reserved. Many people called John Massingbird a handsome man. In character they were quite opposite. John was a harum-scarum fellow, up to every scrape; Frederick was cautious and steady as Old Time.

Seated in the only chair in the room free from litter was a tall, stout lady. But that she had so much crimson about her, she would have borne a remarkable resemblance to those two young men, her sons. She wore a silk dress, gold in one light, green in another, with broad crimson stripes running across it: her cap was of white lace trimmed with crimson ribbons, and her cheeks and nose were crimson to match. As if this were not enough, she wore crimson streamers at her wrists, and a crimson bow in the front of her gown. Had you been outside, you might have seen that the burnished gold on the window-panes had also turned to crimson, for the setting sun had changed its hue; but the panes could not look more brightly, deeply red, than did Mrs. Verner. In that particular, there was a great contrast between her and the perfectly pale, sallow faces of her sons: otherwise the resemblance was striking.

"Fred," said Mrs. Verner, "I wish you would see what they are about with the shirts and things. I sent Rachel after them, but she does not come back, and then I sent Mary Tynn, and she does not come either. Here's John as impatient as he can be."

She spoke in a slow, somewhat indifferent tone, as if she did not care to put herself out of the way about it. Indeed it was not Mrs. Verner's custom to put herself out of the way for anything. She liked to eat, drink, and sleep in undisturbed peace; and she generally did so.

"John's impatient because he wants to get it over," spoke up that gentleman himself in a merry voice. "Fifty thousand things have I to do between now and to-morrow night. If they don't bring the things soon, I shall close the boxes without them, and leave them as a legacy for Fred."

"You have only yourself to thank, John," said his mother. "You never gave the things out until after breakfast this morning, and then required them to be done by the afternoon. Such nonsense, to say they had turned yellow in the drawers! They'll be yellower by the time you get out there. It is just like you! driving everything off to the last moment. You have known you were going some days past."

John was throwing all his weight upon a box to get down the lid, and did not attend to the reproach. "See if it will lock, Fred, will you?" said he.

Frederick Massingbird stooped and tried to turn the key. And just then Mrs. Tynn entered with a tray of clean linen, which she

put down. Rachel followed; a contrivance in her hand, made of silk, for holding of needles, threads, and pins, all in one.

She looked positively beautiful as she held it out before Mrs. Verner. The evening rays fell upon her exquisite face, with its soft dark eyes and its changing colour; they fell upon her silk dress, a relic of Mrs. Verner's—but it had no crimson stripes upon it; upon her lace collar, and the little edging of lace at her wrists. Nature had certainly intended Rachel for a lady, with her graceful form, her charming manners, and her delicate hands.

"Will this do, ma'am?" she inquired. "Is it the sort of thing you meant?"

"Ay, that will do, Rachel," replied Mrs. Verner. "John, here's a housewife for you."

"A what?" asked John Massingbird, arresting his work.

"A book to hold your needles and thread. Rachel has made it very nicely. Won't you want a thimble?"

"Goodness knows," replied John. "That's it, Fred! that's it! Give it a turn."

Frederick Massingbird locked the box, and then left the room. His mother followed him, telling John she had a large steel thimble somewhere, and would try and find it for him. Rachel began filling the housewife with needles, and John went on with his packing.

"Holloa!" he presently exclaimed. And Rachel looked up.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"I have pulled one of the strings off this green case. You must sew it on again, Rachel."

He brought a piece of green baize to her and a broken string. It looked something like the cover of a pocket-book or of a small case of instruments.

Rachel's nimble fingers soon repaired the damage. John stood before her, looking on.

Looking not only at the progress of the work, but at her. Mr. John Massingbird was one who had an eye for beauty: he had not seen much in his life that could equal that before him. As Rachel held the case up to him, the damage repaired, he suddenly bent his head to steal a kiss.

But Rachel was too quick for him. She flung his face away with her hand; she flushed vividly; she was grievously indignant. That she considered it in the light of an insult was only too apparent: her voice was pained—her words were severe.

"Be quiet, stupid! I was not going to eat you," laughed John Massingbird. "I won't tell Luke."

"Insult upon insult!" she exclaimed, strangely excited. "You know that Luke Roy is nothing to me, Mr. Massingbird; you know that I have never in my life vouchsafed to give him an encouraging

word. But, much as I despise him—much as he is beneath me—I would rather submit to have my face touched by him than by you."

What more she would have said was interrupted by the reappearance of Mrs. Verner. That lady's ears had caught sounds of the contest, the harsh words; and she felt inexpressibly surprised.

"What has happened?" she asked. "What is it, Rachel?"

"She pricked herself with one of the needles," said John, taking the explanation upon himself; "and then said I did it."

Mrs. Verner looked from one to the other. Rachel had turned quite pale. John laughed: he knew his mother did not believe him.

"The truth is, mother, I began teasing Rachel about her admirer, Luke. It made her angry."

"What absurdity!" exclaimed Mrs. Verner, testily, to Rachel. "My opinion is, you would have done well to encourage Luke. He was steady and respectable; and old Roy must have saved plenty of money."

Rachel burst into tears.

"What now!" cried Mrs. Verner. "Not a word can any one say to you lately, Rachel, but you must begin to cry as if you were heart-broken. What has come to you, child? Is anything the matter with you?"

The tears deepened into long sobs of agony, as though her heart were indeed broken. She held her handkerchief to her face, and went sobbing from the room.

Mrs. Verner gazed after her in very astonishment.

"What has come to her? What can it possibly be?" she uttered. "John, you must know."

"I, mother! I declare to you that I know no more about it than Adam. Rachel must be going a little crazed."

CHAPTER II.

THE WILLOW POND.

BEFORE the sun had well set, the family at Verner's Pride were assembling for dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Verner, and John Massingbird: neither Lionel Verner nor Frederick Massingbird was present. The usual custom appeared somewhat reversed on this evening: whilst roving John would be just as likely to absent himself from dinner as not, his brother and Lionel Verner nearly always appeared at it. Mr. Verner looked surprised.

"Where are they?" he cried, as he waited to say grace.

"Mr. Lionel has not come in, sir," replied Tynn, the butler, who was husband to the housekeeper.

"And Fred has gone out to keep some engagement with Sibylla West," spoke up Mrs. Verner. "She is going to spend the evening at the Bitterworths', and Fred promised, I believe, to see her safely there. He will dine when he comes in."

Mr. Verner bent his head, said grace, and they began dinner.

Later,—but not much later, for it was scarcely dark yet,—Rachel Frost was leaving the house to pay a visit in the adjoining village, Deerham. Her position may at once be explained. It was mentioned in the last chapter that Mr. Verner had had one daughter, who died young. The mother of Rachel Frost had been this child's nurse, Rachel being an infant at the same time, so that the child, Rachel Verner, and Rachel Frost—named after her—had been what are called foster-sisters. It had caused Mr. Verner, and his wife also while she lived, to take an interest in Rachel Frost; and it is very probable that their own child's death only made this interest greater. They were sufficiently wise not to raise the girl very much out of her proper sphere; but they paid for a decent education for her at a day-school, and were personally kind to her. Rachel—I was going to say fortunately, but it may be as correct to say *un*fortunately—was one of those who seem to make the best of every trifling advantage. She had grown up, without much effort of her own, into what might be termed a lady, in appearance, in manners, and in speech. The second Mrs. Verner also took an interest in her; and nearly a year before this period, on Rachel's eighteenth birthday, she took her to Verner's Pride as her own attendant.

A fascinating, lovable child had Rachel Frost ever been: she was a fascinating, lovable girl. Modest, affectionate, generous, every one liked Rachel. She had not an enemy, so far as was known, in all Deerham. Her father was nothing but a labourer on the Verner estate; but in mind and conduct he was superior to his station; an upright, conscientious, and, in some degree, a proud man. Her mother had been dead several years. Rachel was proud too, in her way; proud and sensitive.

Rachel, dressed in her bonnet and shawl, passed out of the house by the front entrance. She would not have presumed to do so by daylight; but it was dusk now, the family were not about, and it cut off a few yards of the road to the village. The terrace—you have heard of it as running the whole length of the house—sloped gradually down at either end to the level ground, to admit the approach of carriages.

Riding swiftly up to the door, as Rachel appeared at it, was a gentleman of some five or six-and-twenty years. Horse and man

both looked thorough-bred. Tall, strong, and slender, with a keen dark-blue eye, and regular features of a clear healthy paleness, he—the man—would draw a second glance to himself wherever he might be met. His face was not inordinately handsome; nothing of the sort; but it wore an air of candour, of noble integrity. A somewhat impassive face in repose, somewhat cold; but, in speaking, it grew expressive to animation, and the frank smile that would light it up made its greatest charm. The smile stole over it now, as he checked his horse and bent towards Rachel.

"Have they thought me lost? I suppose dinner has begun?"

"Dinner has been in this half-hour, sir."

"All right. I feared they might wait. What's the matter, Rachel? You have been making your eyes red."

"The matter! There's nothing the matter with me, Mr. Lionel," was Rachel's reply, her tone betraying a touch of annoyance. And she turned and walked swiftly along the terrace, beyond the glare of the gas-lamp.

Up stole a man at this moment, who must have been hidden amongst the pillars of the portico, watching the momentary meeting, watching an opportunity to speak. It was Roy, the bailiff: and he accosted the gentleman with the same complaint, touching the ill-doings of the Dawsons and the village in general, that had previously been carried to Mr. Verner by Frederick Massingbird.

"I was told to wait and take my orders from you, sir," he wound up with. "The master don't like to be troubled, and he wouldn't give none."

"Neither shall I give any," was the answer, "until I know more about it."

"They ought to be got out to-night, Mr. Lionel!" exclaimed the man, striking his hand fiercely in the air. "They sow all manner of incendiarisms in the place, with their bad example."

"Roy," said Lionel Verner, in quiet tones, "I have not, as you know, interfered actively in the management of things. I have not opposed my opinion against my uncle's, or very much against yours; I have not come between you and him. When I have given orders, they have been his orders, not mine. But many things go on that I disapprove of: and I tell you candidly, that were I to become master to-morrow, my first act would be to displace you, unless you could undertake to give up these acts of petty oppression."

"Unless some of 'em was oppressed and kept under, they'd be for riding roughshod over the whole of us," retorted Roy.

"Nonsense!" said Lionel. "Nothing breeds rebellion like oppression. You are too fond of oppression, Roy; and Mr. Verner knows it."

"They're an idle, poaching, good-for-nothing lot, them Dawsons," pursued Roy. "And now that they be behindhand with their rent, it is a glorious opportunity to get rid of 'em. I'd turn 'em into the road, without a bed to lie on, this very night!"

"How would you like to be turned into the road without a bed to lie on?" demanded Lionel.

"Me!" returned Roy, in dudgeon. "Do you compare me to that Dawson lot? When I give cause to be turned out, then I hope I may be turned out, sir, that's all. Mr. Lionel," he added, in a more conciliating tone, "I know better about outdoor things than you, and I say it's necessary to get rid of the Dawsons. Give me the power to act in this."

"I will not," said Lionel. "I forbid you to act in it at all, until the circumstances shall have been inquired into."

He sprang from his horse, flung the bridle to the groom, who at that moment came forward, and strode into the house with the air of a young chieftain. Certainly Lionel Verner appeared fitted by nature to be the heir of Verner's Pride.

Rachel Frost, meanwhile, gained the road, and took the path to the left, which would lead her to the village. Her thoughts were bent on many sources, not altogether pleasant; one of which was the annoyance she had experienced at finding her name coupled with that of the bailiff's son, Luke Roy. There was no foundation for it. She had disliked Luke, rather than liked him; her repugnance no doubt arising from the very favour he felt disposed to show to her: and her account of past matters to the bailiff was in accordance with facts. As she walked along, pondering, she became aware that two persons were advancing towards her in the twilight. She knew them instantly, almost by intuition, but they were too much occupied with each other to have noticed her. One was Frederick Massingbird; and the young lady on his arm was his cousin, Sibylla West, a girl young and fascinating as was Rachel. Mr. Frederick Massingbird had been suspected of a more than ordinary liking for this young lady; but he had protested in Rachel's hearing, as in that of others, that his was only cousin's love. Some impulse prompted Rachel to glide in at a field-gate which she was then passing, and stand behind the hedge until they should have gone by. Possibly she did not care to be seen.

It was a still night, and their voices were borne distinctly to Rachel as they slowly advanced. The first words to reach her came from the young lady.

"You will be going out after him, Frederick. That will be the next thing, I expect."

"Sibylla," was the answer, and his accents bore that earnest, tender, confidential tone, which of itself alone betrays love, "be

very sure of one thing: that I go neither there nor elsewhere without taking you with me."

"Oh, Frederick, is it not enough for John to go?"

"If I saw a better prospect there than here, I should follow him. He will write and report after he has arrived, and got settled. My darling; I am ever thinking of the future for your sake."

"But is it not a dreadful country? There are wolves and bears in it that eat people up."

Frederick Massingbird slightly laughed at the remark.

"Do you think I would take my wife to the claws of wolves and bears?" he asked in tones of the deepest tenderness. "She will be too precious to me for that, Sibylla."

The voices and footsteps died away in the distance, and Rachel came out of her hiding-place, and went quickly on towards the village. Her father's cottage was soon reached. He did not live alone. His only son, Robert—who had a wife and family—lived with him. Robert was the son of his youth: Rachel the daughter of his age: the children of two wives. Matthew Frost's wife had died in giving birth to Robert, and twenty years elapsed ere he married a second. He was seventy years of age now, but still upright as a dart, with a fine, fresh complexion, a clear bright eye, and snow-white hair that fell in curls on the collar of his white smock-frock.

He was sitting at a small table apart when Rachel entered, a candle and a large open Bible upon it. A flock of grandchildren crowded round him, two of them on his knees. He was showing them the pictures. To gaze wonderingly on those pictures, and never tire of asking explanations of their mysteries, was the chief business of the little Frosts' lives. Robert's wife—but he was hardly ever called anything but Robin—was preparing something over the fire for the evening meal. Rachel went up and kissed her father. He scattered the children from him, to make room for her. He loved her dearly. Robin loved her dearly. When Robin was a grown-up young man, the pretty baby had come to be his plaything. Robin seemed to love her still, better than he loved his own children.

"Thee'st been crying, child!" cried old Matthew Frost. "What has ailed thee?"

Had Rachel known that signs of her past tears were so evident as to call forth remark from every one she met, she might have remained at home. Assuming a gay air, she laughed off the matter. Matthew pressed it.

"Something went wrong at home, and I was scolded," said Rachel, at length. "It was not worth crying over, though."

Mrs. Frost turned round from her saucepan.

"A scolding from the missis, Rachel?"

"There's no one else at Verner's Pride should scold me," responded Rachel, with a charming little air of self-consequence. "Mrs. Verner said a cross word or two, and I was so stupid as to burst out crying. I have had a headache all day, and that's sure to put me out of sorts."

"There's always things to worry one in service, let it be ever so good on the whole," philosophically observed Mrs. Frost, bestowing her attention again upon the saucepan. "Better be one's own missis on a crust, say I, than be at the beck and call of others."

"Rachel," interrupted old Matthew, "when I let you go to Verner's Pride, I thought it was for your good. But I wouldn't keep you there a day, child, if you are unhappy."

"Dear father, don't take up that notion," she quickly rejoined. "I am happier at Verner's Pride than I should be anywhere else. I would not leave it. Where is Robin this evening?"

"Robin——"

The answer was interrupted by the entrance of Robin himself. A short man, with a red, somewhat obstinate-looking face. His eye lighted up when he saw Rachel; and Mrs. Frost poured out the contents of her saucepan, which appeared to be a compound of Scotch oatmeal and treacle. Rachel was invited to take some, but declined. She lifted one of the children on her knee—a pretty little girl named after herself. The child did not seem well, and Rachel hushed it to her, bringing down her own sweet face caressingly upon the little one's.

"So I hear that Mr. John Massingbird's going to London on a visit?" cried Robin to his sister, holding out his basin for a second supply of porridge.

The question had to be repeated three times, and then Rachel seemed to awake to it with a start. She had been gazing at vacancy, as if buried in a dream.

"Mr. John? A visit to London? Oh yes, yes: he is going to London."

"Does he make much of a stay?"

"I can't tell," said Rachel, slightingly. A certain confidence had been reposed in her at Verner's Pride; but it was not her business to make it known, even in her father's home. Rachel was not a good hand at deception, and she changed the subject. "Has there not been some disturbance with the Dawsons to-day? Old Roy was at Verner's Pride this afternoon, and the servants have been saying he came up about the Dawsons."

"He wanted to turn 'em out," replied Robin.

"He's Grip Roy all over," said Mrs. Frost.

Old Matthew Frost shook his head. "There has been ill feeling smouldering between Roy and old Dawson this long time," said

he. "Now that it's come to open war, I misdoubt me but there'll be violence."

"There's ill feeling between Roy and a many more, father, besides the Dawsons," observed Robin.

"Ay! Rachel, child,"—turning his head to the hearth, where his daughter sat apart—"folks have said that young Luke wants to make up to you. But I should not like it. Luke's a well-meaning, kind-hearted lad himself, but I'd not like you to be daughter-in-law to old Roy."

"Be easy, father, dear. I wouldn't have Luke Roy if he were made of gold. I never yet had anything to say to him, and I never will have. We can't help our likes and dislikes."

"Pshaw!" said Robin, with pardonable pride. "Pretty Rachel is not for a daft chap like Luke Roy, that's a head and ears shorter than other men. Be you, my dear one?"

Rachel laughed. Her conscience told her that she enjoyed a joke at Luke's low stature. She took a shower of kisses from the little girl, put her down, and rose.

"I must go," she said. "Mrs. Verner may be calling for me."

"Don't she know you have come out?" asked old Matthew.

"No. But do not fear that I came clandestinely—or, as our servants would say, on the sly," added Rachel, with a smile. "Mrs. Verner has told me to run down to see you whenever I like, after she has gone in to dinner. Good night, dear father."

The old man pressed her to his heart: "Don't thee get fretting again, my blessing. I don't care to see thee with red eyes."

For answer Rachel burst into tears again—a sudden, violent burst. She dashed them away with a defiant, reckless sort of air, broke into a laugh, and blamed her headache. Robin said he would walk home with her.

"No, Robin, I would rather you did not to-night," she replied. "I have two or three things to get at Mother Duff's, and I shall stop there a bit, gossiping. After that, I shall be home in a tricc. It's not quite dark: and if it were, who would harm me?"

They laughed. To imagine harm of any sort arriving, through walking a mile or so alone at night, would never enter the head of honest country people. Rachel departed; and Robin, a domesticated man upon the whole, helped his wife to put the children to bed.

Scarcely an hour later, a strange commotion arose in the village. People ran about wildly, whispering dread words to one another. A woman had just been drowned in the Willow Pond.

The whole place flocked down to the Willow Pond. On its banks, the centre of an awe-struck crowd, which had been quickly gathering, lay a body, recently taken out of the water. It was all that remained of poor Rachel Frost—cold, white, and DEAD!

CHAPTER III.

THE NEWS BROUGHT HOME.

In the dining-room at Verner's Pride, comfortably asleep in an arm-chair, her face turned to the fire and her feet on a footstool, sat Mrs. Verner. Dessert remained on the table, but no one was there to partake of it. Mr. Verner had retired to his study upon the withdrawal of the cloth, according to his usual custom. Always a man of spare habits, shunning the pleasures of the table, he had scarcely taken sufficient to support nature since his health had failed. Mrs. Verner would remonstrate: but his medical attendant, Dr. West, said it was better for him that it should be so. Lionel Verner (who had come in for the end of the dinner) and John Massingbird had likewise left the room and the house, but not together. Mrs. Verner sat on alone. She liked to take her share of dessert, if the others did not, and she generally remained in the dining-room for the evening, rarely caring to move. Truth to say, Mrs. Verner was rather addicted to dropping asleep with her last glass of wine and waking up with the tea-tray. As she did this evening.

Of course work goes on downstairs (or is supposed to go on), whether the mistress of a house is sleeping or waking. It was really going on that evening in the laundry at Verner's Pride, whatever it may have been doing in the other branches and departments of the house. The laundry-maids had had heavy labour on their hands that day, and they were hard at work still, while Mrs. Verner slept.

"Here's Mother Duff's Dan coming in!" exclaimed one of the women, glancing over her ironing-board into the yard. "What does he want, I wonder?"

"Who?" cried Nancy, the under-housemaid, a tart sort of girl, whose work it was to assist in the laundry on busy days.

"Dan Duff. Just see what he wants, Nancy. He's got a parcel."

The gentleman familiarly called Dan Duff, was an urchin of ten years old. He was the son of Mrs. Duff, linendraper-in-ordinary to Deerham—a lady popularly spoken of as "Mother Duff," both behind her back and before her face. Nancy darted out at the laundry-door and waylaid the intruder in the yard.

"Now, Dan Duff!" cried she, "what do you want?"

"Please, here's this," was Dan Duff's reply, handing over the parcel. "And, please, I want to see Rachel Frost."

"Who's it for? What's inside it?" sharply asked Nancy, examining the parcel on all sides.

"It's things as Rachel Frost have been buying," he replied. "Please, I want to see her."

"Then want must be your master," retorted Nancy. "Rachel Frost's not at home."

"*Ain't* she?" returned Dan Duff, in surprise. "Why, she left our shop a sight afore I did! Mother says, please, would she mind having some o' the dark lavender print instead o' the light, 'cause Susan Peckaby's come in, and wants the whole o' the light lavender for a gownd, and there's only just enough of it. And, please, I be to take word back."

"How are you to take word back if she's not in?" asked Nancy, whose temper never was improved by extra work. "Get along with you, Dan Duff! You must come again to-morrow, if you want her."

Dan Duff meekly turned to depart, and Nancy carried the parcel into the laundry and flung it on the ironing-board.

"It's fine to be Rachel Frost," she cried sarcastically. "Going shopping like any lady, and having her things sent home for her! And messages about her gownds coming up—which will she have, if you please, and which won't she have! I'll borrer one of the horses to-morrow, and go shopping myself on a side-saddle!"

"Has Rachel gone shopping to-night?" cried one of the women, pausing in her ironing. "I did not know she was out."

"She has been out all the evening," was Nancy's answer. "I met her coming down the stairs, dressed. And she could tell a story over it, too, for she said she was going to see her old father."

But Master Dan Duff is not done with yet. If that gentleman stood in awe of one earthly thing more than another, it was of the anger of his revered mother. Mrs. Duff, in her maternal capacity, was rather active both with hands and tongue. Sole head of her flock, for she was a widow, she deemed it best to rule with firmness, not to say severity; and her son Dan, awed by his own timid nature, tried hard to steer his course so as to avoid the shoals and quicksands of her ill temper. He crossed the yard, after the rebuff administered by Nancy, and passed out of the gate, where he stood still to revolve affairs. His mother had imperatively ordered him to *bring back* the answer touching the momentous question of the light and the dark lavender prints; and Susan Peckaby—one of the greatest idlers in all Deerham—said she would wait in the shop until he came back with it. He stood softly whistling, his hands in his pockets, and balancing himself on his heels.

"I'll get a basting, for sure," soliloquized he. "Mother'll lose the sale of the gownd, and then she'll say it's my fault, and baste me for it. What's gone of her? Why couldn't she ha' come home, as she said?"

He set his wits to work to divine what *could* have "gone of her"

—alluding of course to Rachel. And a bright thought occurred to him—really not an unnatural one—that she had probably taken the other road home. It was a longer round, through the fields, and there were stiles to climb, and gates to mount: which might account for delay. He arrived at the conclusion, though somewhat slow at drawing conclusions generally, that if he returned home that way, he should meet Rachel; and could then ask his question.

Had he turned to the left, he would have regained the high-road, whence he came. If he turned to the right, he would plunge into fields and lanes, and covered ways; emerging at length, in the midst of the village, almost close to his own house. It was a lonely way at night, and longer than the other, but Master Dan Duff regarded these as pleasant evils, in comparison with a "basting." He took his hands out of his pockets, brought down his feet, and turned to it, whistling still.

It was a tolerably light night. The moon was up, though not very high, and a few stars might be seen here and there in the blue canopy above. Mr. Dan Duff proceeded on his way, though not very quickly. Some dim idea was penetrating his brain that the slower he walked, the better chance there might be of his meeting Rachel.

"She's just a cat, is that Susan Peckaby!" decided he resentfully, in the intervals of his whistling. "It was her as put mother up to the thought o' sending me to-night: Rachel Frost said the things 'ud do in the morning. 'Let Dan carry 'em up now,' says Dame Peckaby, 'and ask her about the print, and then I'll take it home along o' me.' And if I go in without the answer, she'll be the first to help mother to beat me! Hi! ho! hur! hur-r-r-r!"

This concluding divertisement was caused by his catching sight of some small animal scudding along. He was at that moment traversing a narrow winding lane; and, in the field to the right, as he looked in at the open gate, he saw the movement. It might be a cat, it might be a hare, it might be a rabbit, it might be some other animal: it was all one to Mr. Dan Duff: and he had not been boy had he resisted the temptation to pursue it. Catching up a handful of earth from the lane, he shied it in the proper direction, and tore in at the gate after it.

Nothing came of the pursuit. The trespasser had earthed itself, and Mr. Dan came slowly back again. He had almost approached the gate, when some one passed it, walking up the lane with a quick step, from the direction in which he, Dan, was bound. Dan saw enough to know that it was not Rachel, for it was the figure of a man; but Dan set off to run, and emerged from the gate just in time to catch another glimpse of the person, as he disappeared beyond the windings of the lane.

"'Twarn't Rachel, at all events," was his comment. And he turned and pursued his way again.

It was somewhere about this time that Tynn made his appearance in the dining-room at Verner's Pride, to put away the dessert, and set the tea. The sound awoke Mrs. Verner.

"Send Rachel to me," said she, winking and blinking at the tea-cups.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Tynn.

He left the room when he had placed the things to his satisfaction. He called for Rachel high and low, up and down. All to no purpose. The servants did not appear to know anything about her. One of them went to the door and shouted out to the laundry to know whether Rachel was there, and the answer "No" came back. The footman at length remembered that he had seen her go out at the hall-door when dinner was in. Tynn carried this item of information to Mrs. Verner. It did not please her.

"Of course!" she grumbled. "Let me want any one of you particularly, and you are sure to be away! If she did go out, she ought not to stay out so long as this. Who's this coming in?"

It was Frederick Massingbird. He entered, singing a scrap of a song, which was cut suddenly short when his eye fell on the servant.

"Tynn," said he, "you must bring me something to eat. I have had no dinner."

"You cannot be very hungry, or you'd have come in before," remarked Mrs. Verner. "It is tea-time now."

"I'll take tea and dinner together," was his answer.

"But you ought to have been in before," she persisted; for, though an easy mistress and mother, Mrs. Verner did not like the order of meals disturbed. "Where have you stayed, Fred? You have not been all this time taking Sibylla West to Mrs. Bitterworth's."

"You must talk to Sibylla West about that," answered Fred. "When young ladies keep you waiting a good hour, whilst they make themselves ready to start, you can't get back precisely to your own time."

"What did she keep you waiting for?" questioned Mrs. Verner.

"Some toilette mystery, I conclude. When I got there, Amilly said Sibylla was dressing: and a pretty prolonged dressing it appeared to be! Since I left her at Mrs. Bitterworth's, I have been to Poynton's about my mare. She was as lame as ever to-day."

"And there's Rachel out now, just as I am wanting her!" went on Mrs. Verner, who, when she did lapse into a grumbling mood, was fond of calling up a catalogue of grievances.

"At any rate, that's not my fault, mother," observed Frederick.

"I dare say she will soon be in. Rachel is not given to staying out, I fancy, if there's a chance of her being wanted."

Tynn came in with his tray, and Frederick Massingbird sat down to it. Tynn then waited for Mr. Verner's tea, which he carried into the study. He carried in a cup every evening, but Mr. Verner scarcely ever touched it. Then Tynn returned to the room where the upper servants took their meals and otherwise congregated, and sat down to read a newspaper. He was a short man, very stout, his plain clothes always scrupulously neat and tidy.

A few minutes, and Nancy came in, the parcel left by Dan Duff in her hand. The housekeeper asked her what it was. She explained in her crusty way, and said something to the same effect that she had said in the laundry—that it was fine to be Rachel Frost. "She's long enough making her way up here!" Nancy wound up with. "Dan Duff says she left their shop to come home before he did. If Luke Roy was in Deerham one would know what to think!"

"Bah!" cried the housekeeper. "Rachel Frost has nothing to say to Luke Roy."

Tynn put down his paper, and rose. "I'll just tell the mistress that Rachel's on her way home," said he. "She's put up like anything at her being out—wants her for something particular, she says."

Barely had he departed on his errand, when a commotion was heard in the passage. Mr. Dan Duff had burst in at the back-door, uttering sounds of distress—of fright—his eyes starting, his hair standing on end, his words almost unintelligible.

"Rachel Frost is in the Willow Pond—drownded!"

The women shrieked when they gathered in the sense of his information. It was enough to make them shriek. Dan Duff howled in concert. The passages took up the sounds and echoed them; and Mrs. Verner, Frederick Massingbird, and Tynn came hastening forth. Mr. Verner followed, feebly leaning on his stick. Frederick Massingbird seized upon the boy, questioning sharply.

"Rachel Frost's drownded in the Willow Pond," he reiterated. "I see'd her."

A moment of pause, of startled suspense, and then they flew off, men and women, as with one accord, Frederick Massingbird leading the van. Social considerations were forgotten in the overwhelming excitement, and Mr. and Mrs. Verner were left to keep house for themselves. Tynn, indeed, recollected himself, and turned back again.

"No," said Mr. Verner. "Go with the rest, Tynn, and see what it is, and whether anything can be done."

He might have crept thither himself in his feeble strength, but he had not stirred out of the house for two years.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CROWD IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE Willow Pond, so called from its being surrounded with weeping willows, was situated at the corner of a field, in a retired part of the road, about midway between Verner's Pride and Deerham. There was a great deal of timber about that part; it was altogether as lonely as could be desired. When the runners from Verner's Pride reached it, assistance had already arrived, and Rachel, rescued from the pond, was being laid upon the grass. All signs of life were gone.

Who had done it?—what had caused it?—was it an accident?—was it self-inflicted?—or was it a deed of violence? What brought her there at all? No young girl would be likely to take that way home (with all due deference to the opinion of Master Dan Duff) alone at night.

What was to be done? The crowd propounded these various questions in so many tones of wonder, and hustled each other, and talked incessantly; but to be of use, to direct or to suggest, no one appeared capable. Frederick Massingbird stepped forward with authority.

"Carry her at once to Verner's Pride—with all speed. And some of you"—turning to the servants of the house—"hasten on, and get hot water and blankets. Get hot bricks—anything and everything likely to be required. How did she get in?"

He appeared to speak the words more in the light of a terrible regret, than as a question. It was a question that none present appeared able to answer. The crowd was increasing rapidly. One of them suggested that Broom the gamekeeper's cottage was nearer than Verner's Pride.

"But there will be neither hot water nor blankets there," returned Frederick Massingbird.

"The house is the best. Make haste! don't let grass grow under your feet."

"A moment," interposed a gentleman who now approached hastily as they were raising the body. "Lay her down again."

They obeyed him eagerly, and fell back a little that he might have space to bend over her. It was the doctor of the neighbourhood, residing at Deerham. He was a fine man in figure, dark and florid in face, but a more impassive countenance could not well be seen, and he had the peculiarity of rarely looking a person in the face. If a patient's eyes were fixed on Dr. West's, Dr. West's were

invariably fixed upon something else. A clever man in his profession, holding an Edinburgh degree, and practising as a general practitioner. He was brother to the present Mrs. Verner: consequently, uncle to the two young Massingbirds.

"Has any one a match about him?" he asked.

One of the Verner's Pride servants had a whole boxful, and two or three were lighted at a time, and held so that the doctor could see the face better than it could be seen in the uncertain moonlight. It was a strange scene. The lonely, weird character of the place; the dark trees scattered about; the cold pond with its bending willows; the swaying, murmuring crowd collected round the doctor and what he was bending over; the flickering flame of the lighted matches; with the pale moon overhead, sailing higher and higher as the night went on, and struggling through passing clouds.

"How did it happen?" asked Dr. West.

Before any answer could be given, a man came tearing up at full speed; several men, indeed, it may be said. The first was Roy, the bailiff. Upon Roy's leaving Verner's Pride, after the rebuke bestowed upon him by its heir, he had gone straight down to the George and Dragon, a roadside inn, situated on the outskirts of the village, on the way from Verner's Pride. Here he had remained, consorting with frequenters from Deerham, and soothing his mortification with a pipe and sundry cans of ale. When the news was brought in that Rachel Frost had been found drowned in the Willow Pond, Roy, the landlord, and the collected company started off in a body.

"Why, it *is* her!" uttered Roy, taking a hasty view of poor Rachel. "I said it wasn't possible. I saw her and talked to her up at the house but two or three hours ago. How did she get in?"

The same question always; from all alike: how did she get in? Dr. West rose.

"You may move her," he said.

"Is she dead, sir?"

"Yes."

Frederick Massingbird—who had been the one to hold the matches—caught the doctor's arm.

"Not *dead!*" he uttered. "Not dead beyond hope of restoration?"

"She will never be restored in this world," was the reply of Dr. West. "She is quite dead."

"Measures should be tried, at any rate," said Frederick Massingbird, warmly.

"By all means," acquiesced Dr. West. "It will afford satisfaction, though it should do nothing else."

They raised her once more, and turned with quiet, measured steps towards Verner's Pride. Of course the whole assemblage attended. They were eager, curious, boiling over with excitement; but, to give them their due, they were earnestly anxious to afford any aid in their power, and contended who should take a turn at bearing that wet burthen. Not one but felt sorely grieved for Rachel. Even Nancy was subdued to meekness, as she sped on to be one of the busiest in preparing remedies; and old Roy, though somewhat inclined to regard it in the light of a judgment upon proud Rachel for slighting his son, felt twinges of pitying regret.

"I have known cases where people, dead from drowning, have been restored to life," said Roy, as they walked along.

"That you never have," replied Dr. West. "The *apparently* dead have been restored: the dead, never."

Panting, breathless, there came up one as they reached Verner's Pride. He parted the crowd, and threw himself almost upon Rachel with a wild cry. He passed his hands over her cold face, and bent his warm cheek upon it.

"Who has done it?" he sobbed. "What has done it? She couldn't have fell in alone."

It was Robin Frost. Frederick Massingbird drew him away by the arm. "Don't hinder, Robin. Every minute may be worth a life."

And Robin, struck with the argument, obeyed, docile as a little child.

Mr. Verner, leaning on his stick, trembling with weakness and emotion, stood just without the door of the laundry, which had been hastily prepared, as the bearers tramped in.

"It is an awful tragedy!" he murmured. "Is it true"—addressing Dr. West—"that you think there is no hope?"

"I am sure there is none," was the answer. "But every means shall be tried."

The laundry was clear of the crowd, and their work began. One of the next to come up was old Matthew Frost. Mr. Verner took his hand.

"Come into my own room, Matthew," he said. "I feel for you deeply."

"Nay, sir; I must look upon her."

Mr. Verner, pointed with his stick in the direction of the laundry.

"They are shut in there; the doctor and those whom he requires round him," he said. "Let them be undisturbed; it is the only chance."

All things likely to be wanted had been conveyed to the laundry: and they were shut in there, as Mr. Verner expressed it, with their fires and their appliances. On dragged the time. Anxious

watchers were in the house, in the yard, gathered round the back gate. The news had spread, and gentlepeople, friends of the Verners, came hasting from their homes, and pressed into Verner's Pride, and asked question upon question of Mr. and Mrs. Verner, of every one likely to afford an answer. Old Matthew Frost stood outwardly calm and collected, full of inward trust, as a good man should be. He had learnt where to look for support in the darkest trial. Mr. Verner in that night of sorrow seemed to treat him as a brother.

The time went on, and still they plied their remedies, under the direction of Dr. West. All was of no avail, as the experienced physician had told them. Life was extinct. Poor Rachel Frost was really dead!

CHAPTER V.

THE TALL GENTLEMAN IN THE LANE.

APART from the horror of the affair, it was altogether attended with so much mystery that that of itself would have kept excitement alive. What could have taken Rachel Frost near the pond at all? Allowing that she had chosen that lonely road for her way home—which appeared unlikely in the extreme—she must have gone out of it to approach the pond, must have walked partly across a field to reach it. Had her path led close by it, it would have been a different matter: it might have been supposed (unlikely still, though) that she had missed her footing and fallen in. But unpleasant rumours were beginning to circulate in the crowd. It was whispered that sounds of a contest, the voices being those of a man and a woman, had been heard in that direction at the time of the accident, or about that time; and these rumours reached the ear of Mr. Verner.

For the family to think of retiring to rest, or for the crowd to think of dispersing, in the present state of affairs, would have been in the highest degree unreasonable. Mr. Verner set himself to endeavour to get at some sort of solution first. One told one tale; one, another; a third asserted something else; a fourth, the precise opposite. Mr. Verner—and in saying Mr. Verner, we must include all—was fairly puzzled. A notion had sprung up that Dinah Roy, the bailiff's wife, could tell something about it if she would. Certain it was, that she had stood amid the crowd, cowering and trembling, shrinking from observation as much as possible, and recoiling visibly if addressed.

A word of this suspicion was whispered in her husband's ear. It angered him. He was accustomed to keep his wife in due sub-

mission. She was a little body, with a pinched face and a sharp red nose, given to weeping upon every possible occasion, and as indulgently fond of her son Luke as she was afraid of her husband. Since Luke's departure she had passed the better part of her time in tears.

"Now," said Roy, going up to her with authority, and drawing her apart, "what's this as is up with you?"

She looked round her, and shuddered.

"Oh!" cried she, with a moan. "Don't begin to ask, Giles, or I shall be fit to die."

"Do you know anything about this matter, or don't you?" cried he, savagely. "Did you see anything?"

"What should I be likely to see?" quavered Mrs. Roy.

"Did you see Rachel fall into the pond? Or see her a-nigh the pond?"

"No, I didn't," moaned Mrs. Roy. "I never set eyes on Rachel this blessed night at all. I'd take a text o' scripture to it."

"Then what *is* the matter with you?" he demanded, giving her a slight shake.

"Hush, Giles!" responded she, in a tone of unmistakable terror. "I saw a ghost!"

"Saw a—what?" thundered Giles Roy.

"A ghost!" she repeated. "And it have made me shiver ever since."

Giles Roy knew that his wife was rather given to flights of fancy. He was in the habit of administering one sovereign remedy, which he believed to be an infallible panacea for wives' ailments whenever it was applied—a good shaking. He gave her a slight instalment as he turned away.

"Wait till I get ye home," said he, significantly. "I'll drive the ghosts out of ye!"

Mr. Verner had seated himself in his study, with a view to investigating systematically the circumstances connected with the affair, so far as they were known. At present all, even the open details, seemed involved in a Babel of confusion.

"Those able to say anything about it shall come before me, one by one," he observed; "we may possibly get at something then."

The only stranger present was Mr. Bitterworth, an old and intimate friend of Mr. Verner. He was a man of good property, and resided a little beyond Verner's Pride. Others—plenty of them—had been eager to assist in what they called the investigation, but Mr. Verner had declined their offers. A public investigation would come soon enough, he observed, and that must satisfy them. Mrs. Verner saw no reason why she should be absent, and she took her seat with them. Her sons were there. The news had reached John,

out-of-doors, and he had hastened home full of consternation. Dr. West also remained by request, and the Frosts, father and son, had pressed in. Mr. Verner could not deny *them*.

"To begin at the beginning," observed Mr. Verner, "it appears that Rachel left this house between six and seven. Did she mention to any one where she was going?"

"I believe she did to Nancy, sir," replied Tynn, who had been allowed to remain.

"Then call Nancy in," said Mr. Verner.

Nancy came in, but could not say much: only that in going up the front stairs to carry some linen into Mrs. Verner's room, she had met Rachel, dressed to go out. Rachel had said, in passing, that she was about to visit her father.

"And she came?" observed Mr. Verner, turning to Matthew Frost, as Nancy was dismissed.

"She came, sir," replied the old man, who was having an incessant battle with himself for calmness; for it was not *there*, in the presence of others, that he would willingly indulge his grief. "I saw that she had been fretting. Her eyes were red, and I taxed her with it. She was for turning it off at first, but I pressed for the cause, and she then said she had been scolded by her mistress."

"By me!" exclaimed Mrs. Verner, lifting her head in surprise. "I had not scolded her."

But as she spoke she caught the eye of her son John, and she remembered the little scene of the afternoon.

"I recollect now," she resumed. "I spoke a word of reproof to Rachel, and she burst into a violent flood of tears, and ran away from me. It surprised me much. What I said was not sufficient to call forth one tear, let alone a passionate burst of crying."

"What was it about?" asked Mr. Verner.

"I expect John can give a better explanation of it than I," replied Mrs. Verner, after a pause. "I went out of the room for a minute or two, and when I returned, Rachel was talking angrily to John, as it seemed. I could not make out the cause distinctly. John had begun to tease her about Luke Roy, I believe, and she did not like it."

Mr. John Massingbird's conscience called up the little episode of the coveted kiss. But it might not be altogether prudent to confess to it in full conclave.

"It is true that I joked Rachel about Luke," he said. "It seemed to anger her very much, and she paid me out with some hard words. My mother returned at the moment. She asked what was the matter: I said I had joked Rachel about Luke, and that Rachel did not like it."

"Yes, that was it," acquiesced Mrs. Verner. "I then told Rachel that in my opinion she would have done well to encourage Luke, who was a steady young man, and would no doubt have a little money. Upon which she began weeping. I felt rather vexed: not a word have I been able to say to her lately, but tears have been the answer; and I asked what had come to her that she should cry for every trifle as if she were heartbroken. With that, she fell into a burst of sobs, terrifying to see, and ran from the room. I was thunderstruck. I asked John what could be the matter with her, and he said he could only think she was going crazed."

John Massingbird nodded his head, as if in confirmation. Old Matthew Frost spoke up, his voice trembling with the emotion that he was striving to keep under.

"Did she say what it was that had come to her, ma'am?"

"She did not make any reply at all," rejoined Mrs. Verner. "But it is quite nonsense to suppose she could have fallen into that wild burst of grief, simply at being joked about Luke. I could not make her out."

"And she has fallen into fretting, you say, ma'am, lately?" pursued Matthew Frost, leaning his venerable white head forward.

"Often and often," replied Mrs. Verner. "She has seemed quite an altered girl in the last few weeks!"

"My son's wife has said the same," cried old Matthew. "She has said that Rachel was changed. But I took it to mean in her looks—that she had grown thinner. You mind the wife saying it, Robin?"

"Yes, I mind it," shortly replied Robin, who had propped himself against the wall, his arms folded and his head bent. "I'm minding all."

"She wouldn't take a bit o' supper," went on old Matthew. "But that was nothing," he added: "she used to say she had plenty of food here, without eating ours. She sat apart by the fire with one o' the little ones in her lap. She didn't stay overlong; she said the missus might be wanting her, and she left; and when she was kissing my poor old face, she began sobbing. Robin offered to see her home——"

"And she wouldn't have it," interrupted Robin, looking up for the first time, with a wild expression of despair. "She said she had things to get at Mother Duff's, and should stop there a bit, gossiping. It will be on my mind day and night, that if I had went with her, harm couldn't have come."

"And that was how she left you," pursued Mr. Verner. "You did not see her after that? You know nothing further of her movements?"

"Nothing further," assented Robin. "I watched her down the lane as far as the turning, and that was the last."

"Did she go to Mrs. Duff's, I wonder?" asked Mr. Verner.

Oh yes; several of those present could answer that. There was the parcel brought up by Dan Duff, to bear testimony. And, if more had been needed, Mrs. Duff herself had afforded it, for she made one of the crowd outside.

"We must have Mrs. Duff in," said Mr. Verner.

Accordingly, Mrs. Duff was brought in. A voluble lady with red hair. Mr. Verner politely asked her to be seated, but she replied that she preferred to stand, if 'twas all the same. She was used to standing in her shop, and she couldn't never sit for a minute together when she was upset.

"Did Rachel Frost purchase things from you this evening, Mrs. Duff?"

"Well, she did, and she didn't," responded Mrs. Duff. "I never calls it purchasing of things, sir, when a customer comes in and says, 'Just cut me off so and so, and send it up. They're sold, of course, if you look at it in that light: but I'm best pleased when buyers examines the goods, and chats a bit over their merits. Susan Peckaby, now, she——"

"What did Rachel Frost buy?" interrupted Mr. Verner, who knew what Mrs. Duff's tongue was, when it was once set going.

"She looked in at the shop, sir, while I was a serving little Green with some bone buttons, that her mother had sent her for. 'I want some Irish for aprons, Mrs. Duff,' says she. 'Cut off the proper quantity for a couple, and send it me up some time to-morrow. I wouldn't give the trouble,' says she, 'but I can't wait to take it now, for I'm in a hurry to get home, and I shall be wanting the aprons.' 'What quality—pretty good?' said I. 'Oh, you know,' says she: 'about the same that I bought last time. And put in the tape for strings, and a reel of white cotton, No. 30. And I don't mind if you put in a piece of that German ribbon, middling width,' she went on. 'It's nicer than tape for nightcaps, and those sort o' things.' And with that, sir, she was turning out again, when her eyes was caught by some lavender prints, as was hanging just in the doorway. Two shades there was, dark and light. 'That's pretty,' says she. 'It's beautiful,' said I: 'they be the sweetest things I have had in this many a day: and they be the wide width. Won't you take some of it for a gownd?' 'No,' says she, 'I'm set up for cotton gownds.' 'Why not buy a bit for a apron or two?' I said. 'Nothing's neater than them lavender prints for morning aprons, and they saves the white.' So she looked at it for a minute, and then she said I might cut her off a couple o' yards of the light, and send it up with the other things. Well, sir, Sally Green went away with her buttons, and I took down the light print, thinking I'd cut off the two yards at once. Just then, Susan Peckaby comes in for some

grey worsted, and she falls right in love with the print. 'I'll have a gownd of that,' says she, 'and I'll take it now.' In course, sir, I was only too glad to sell it to her, for, like Rachel, she's good pay; but when I come to measure it, there was barely nine yards left, which is what Susan Peckaby takes for a gownd, being as tall as a maypole So I was in a mess: for I couldn't take and sell it all, over Rachel's head, havin offered it to her. 'Perhaps she wouldn't mind having her aprons o' the dark,' says Susan Peckaby: 'it don't matter what colour aprons is o'; they're not like gownds.' And then we agreed that I should send Dan up here at once to ask her, and Susan Peckaby—who seemed mighty eager to have the print—said she'd wait till he came back. And I cut off the white Irish, and wrapped it up with the tape and things, and sent him."

"Rachel Frost had left your shop then?"

"She left it, sir, when she told me she'd have some of the lavender print. She didn't stay another minute."

Robin Frost lifted his head again. "She said she was going to stop at your place for a bit of a gossip, Mother Duff."

"Then she didn't stop," responded that lady. "She never spoke a single word o' gossip, or looked inclined to speak it. She just spoke out short, as if she was in a hurry, and she turned clean out o' the shop afore the words about the lavender print had well left her lips. Ask Sally Green, if you don't believe me."

"You did not see which way she went?" continued Mr. Verner.

"No, sir, I didn't; I was behind my counter. But, for the matter o' that, there was two or three as saw her go out of my shop and take the turning by the pound—which is a good proof she meant to come home here by the field way, for that turning, as you know, sir, leads nowhere else."

Mr. Verner did know it. He also knew—for witnesses had spoken of it outside—that Rachel had been seen to take that turning after she left Mrs. Duff's shop, and that she walked with a quick step.

The next person called in was Master Dan Duff—in a state of extreme consternation at being called in at all. He was planted in front of Mr. Verner, his legs restless. An idea crossed his brain that they might be going to accuse him of putting Rachel into the pond, and he began to cry. With a good deal of trouble on Mr. Verner's part, owing to the young gentleman's timidity, and some circumlocution on his own, the facts, so far as Dan was cognizant of them, were drawn forth. It appeared that, after he had emerged from the field when he made that slight diversion in pursuit of the animal, he continued his road, and had gained the lonely part near where the pond was situated, when young Broom, the son of Mr. Verner's gamekeeper, ran up and asked him what was the matter, and whether anybody was in the pond. Broom did not wait for an answer, but

went on to the pond, and Dan Duff followed him. Sure enough Rachel Frost was in it. They knew her by her clothes, as she rose to the surface. Dan Duff, in his terror, went shrieking back to Verner's Pride, and young Broom, more sensibly, ran for help to get her out.

"How did young Broom know, or suspect, there was any one in the pond?" questioned Mr. Verner.

"I dun know, please, sir," sobbed Dan Duff. "That was what he said as he runned off to it. He asked me if I had seen any folks about, and I said I'd only seen that 'un in the lane."

"Whom did you see in the lane?"

"I dun know who it was, please, sir," returned Dan. "I wasn't a-nigh him."

"But you must have been near him, if you met him in the lane."

"Please, sir, I wasn't in the lane then. I had runned into the field after a cat."

"After a cat?"

"Please, sir, 'twere a cat, I think. But it got away and I didn't find it. I saw somebody a-passing the gate up the lane, but I warn't quick enough to see who."

"Going which way?"

"Please, sir, up towards here. If I hadn't turned into the field, I should ha' met him face to face. I dun know who it was."

"Did you hear any noise near the pond, or see any movement in its direction, before you were accosted by Broom?"

"Please, sir, no."

It appeared to be of little use to detain Mr. Duff. In his stead young Broom was called in. A fine-grown young fellow of nineteen, whose temperament may be indicated by two words—cool and lazy. He was desired to give his own explanation.

"I was going home for the night, sir," he began, in answer. "when I heard the sound of voices in dispute. They seemed to come from the direction of the grove of trees near the Willow Pond, and I stayed to listen. I thought perhaps some of the Dawsons and Roy had come to an encounter out there; but I soon found that one of the voices was a woman's. Quite a young voice it sounded, and it was broke by sobs and tears. The other voice was a man's."

"Only two! Did you recognize them!"

"No, sir, I did not recognize them. I was too far off, maybe. I only made out that it was two—a man's and a woman's. I stopped a few minutes, listening, and they seemed to quiet down, and then, as I was going on again, I came up to Mrs. Roy. She was kneeling down, and——"

"Kneeling down?" interrupted Mr. Verner.

"She was kneeling down, sir, with her hands clasped round the trunk of a tree, like one in mortal fright. She laid hold of me then, and I asked what was the matter with her, and she answered that she had been a'most frightened to death. I asked whether it was at the quarrel, but she only said, 'Hush! listen!' and at last she set on to cry. Just then we heard an awful shriek and a plunge into the water. 'There goes something into the Willow Pond,' said I, and I was turning to run to it, when Mrs. Roy shrieked out louder than before, and fell flat to the earth. I never hardly see such a face for ghastliness. The moon was shining out full then, and it daunted me to look at her. I thought she was dead, and that the fright had killed her. There wasn't a bit o' breath in her body, and I raised her head, not knowing what to do with her. Presently she heaved a sort of sigh, and opened her eyes; and with that she seemed to recollect herself, and asked what was in the pond. I left her and went off to it, meeting Dan Duff—and we found it was Rachel Frost. Dan set on to howl, and wouldn't stay, and I went for the nearest help, and got her out. That's all, sir."

"Was she already dead?"

"Well, sir, when you first get a person out of the water it's hard to say whether they be dead or not. She seemed dead, but perhaps if there had been means right at hand, she might have been brought to again."

A moan from old Matthew. Mr. Verner continued, as it died out:

"Rachel Frost's voice must have been one of those you heard in dispute?"

"Not a doubt of that, sir," replied young Broom. "Any more than that there must have been foul play at work to get her into the pond, or that the other voice must have belonged to the man who did it."

"Softly, softly," said Mr. Verner. "Did you see any man about?"

"I saw nobody at all, sir, saving Dan Duff and Mrs. Roy; and Rachel's quarrel could not have been with either of them. Whoever the other was, he had made himself scarce."

Robin Frost took a step forward respectfully.

"Did you mind, sir, that Mother Duff's Dan spoke to seeing some person in the lane?"

"I do," replied Mr. Verner. "I should like to ask the boy another question or two upon that point. Call him in, one of you."

John Massingbird went out and brought back the boy.

"Mind you have your wits sharp about you this time, Mr. Duff," he remarked. Which piece of advice had the effect of scaring Mr. Duff's wits more completely away than they had been scared before.

"You tell us that you saw a man pass up the lane when you were

in the field after the cat," began Mr. Verner. "Was the man walking fast?"

"Please, sir, yes. Afore I could get out o' the gate he was near out o' sight. He went a'most as fast as the cat did."

"How long was it, after you saw him, before you met young Broom, and heard that somebody was in the pond?"

"Please, sir, 'twas a'most directly. I was running then, I was."

As the boy's answer fell upon the room a conviction stole over most of those collected in it that this man must have been the one who had been heard in dispute with Rachel Frost.

"Were there no signs about him by which you could recognize him?" pursued Mr. Verner. "What did he look like! Was he tall or short?"

"Please, sir, he were very tall."

"Could you see his dress? Was it like a gentleman's or a labourer's?"

"Please, sir, I think it looked like a gentleman's—like one o' the gentlemen's at Verner's Pride."

"Whose? Like which of the gentlemen's?" rung out Mr. Verner's voice, sharply and sternly, after a moment's pause of surprise, for he evidently had not expected the answer.

"Please, sir, I dun know which. The clothes looked dark, and the man were as tall as the gentlemen, or as Calves."

"*Calves?*" echoed Mr. Verner, puzzled.

John Massingbird broke into an involuntary smile. He knew that their tall footman, Bennet, was universally styled "Calves" in the village. Dan Duff probably believed it to be his registered name.

But Frederick Massingbird was looking dark and threatening. The suspicion hinted at—if you can call it a suspicion—angered him. The villagers were wont to say that Mr. Frederick had ten times more pride than Mr. John. They were not far wrong—Mr. John had none at all.

"Boy!" Frederick sternly said, "what grounds have you for saying it was like one of the gentlemen?"

Dan Duff began to sob. "I dun know who it were," he said; "indeed I don't. But he were tall, and his clothes looked dark. Please, sir, if you basted me, I couldn't tell no more."

It was believed that he could not. Mr. Verner dismissed him, and John Massingbird, according to order, went to bring in Mrs. Roy.

He was some little time before he found her. She was discovered at last in a corner of the steward's room, seated on a low stool, her head bent down on her knees.

"Now, ma'am," said John, with unwonted politeness, "you are being waited for."

She looked up, startled. She rose from her seat, and began to tremble, her lips moving, her teeth chattering. But no sound came forth.

"You are not going to your hanging, Dinah Roy," said John Massingbird, by way of consolation. "Mr. Verner is gathering evidence about this unfortunate business, and it is your turn to go in and state what you know, or saw."

She staggered back a step or two, and fell against the wall, her face changing to one of livid terror.

"I—I—saw nothing!" she gasped.

"Oh yes, you did! Come along!"

She put up her hands in a supplicating attitude; she was on the point of sinking on her knees in her abject fear, when at that moment the stern face of her husband appeared at the door. She sprang up as if electrified, and meekly followed John Massingbird.

CHAPTER VI.

DINAH ROY'S "GHOST."

THE moon, high in the heavens, shone brightly, lighting up the fair domain of Verner's Pride, the broad terrace, and one who was hastening along it. All looked as peaceful as if a deed of dark mystery had not that night been committed.

He, skimming the terrace with a fleet foot, was that domain's recognized heir, Lionel Verner. Tynn and others were standing in the hall, talking in groups, after the manner of dependents when something unusual and exciting is going on. Lionel appeared full of emotion when he burst in upon them.

"Is it true?" he demanded, speaking impulsively. "Is Rachel really dead?"

"She is dead, sir."

"Drowned?"

"Yes, sir, drowned."

He stood as one confounded. He had heard the news in the village, but this confirmation was as startling as if he now heard it for the first time. A hasty word of emotion, and then he looked again at Tynn.

"Was it the result of accident?"

Tynn shook his head.

"It's to be feared not, sir. There was a dreadful quarrel heard, it seems, near to the pond, just before it happened. My master is inquiring into it now, sir, in his study. Mr. Bitterworth and others are there."

Giving his hat to the butler, Lionel Verner opened the study door, and entered. It was at the precise moment when John Massingbird had gone out for Mrs. Roy; so that, as may be said, there was a lull in the proceedings.

Mr. Verner looked glad when Lionel appeared. The ageing man, enfeebled by sickness, had grown to lean on the strong young intellect. As much as it was in Mr. Verner's nature to love anything, he loved Lionel. He beckoned him to a chair beside himself.

"Yes, sir, in an instant," nodded Lionel. "Matthew," he whispered, laying his hand kindly on the old man's shoulder as he passed, and bending down to him with his sympathizing eyes, his pleasant voice: "I am grieved for this as if it had been my own sister. Believe me."

"I know it; I know you, Mr. Lionel," was the faint answer. "Don't unman me, sir, before 'em here; leave me to myself."

With a pressure of his hand on the shoulder ere he quitted it, Lionel turned to Frederick Massingbird, asking particulars in an undertone.

"I don't know them myself," replied Frederick, his accent haughty. "There seems to be nothing but uncertainty and mystery about it. Mr. Verner ought not to have inquired into it in this half-official way. Very disagreeable things have been said, I assure you: there was not the least necessity for allowing such absurdities to go forth, as suspicions, to the public. You have not been running from the Willow Pond at a strapping pace, I suppose, to-night?"

"That I certainly have not," replied Lionel.

"Neither has John, I am sure," returned Frederick, resentfully. "It is not likely. And yet that boy of Mother Duff's——"

The words were interrupted. The door had opened, and John Massingbird appeared, marshalling in Dinah Roy. Dinah looked ready to die, with her ashy face and her trembling frame.

"Why, what is the matter?" exclaimed Mr. Verner.

The woman burst into tears.

"Oh, sir, I don't know nothing of it; I protest I don't," she uttered. "I declare that I never set eyes on Rachel Frost this blessed night."

"But you were near the spot at the time?"

"Oh, bad luck to me, I was!" she answered, wringing her hands. "But I know no more how she got into the water than a child unborn."

"Where's the necessity for being put out about it, my good woman?" spoke up Mr. Bitterworth. "If you know nothing, you can tell nothing. But you must state what you do know—why you were there, what startled you, and so on. Perhaps—if she

were to have a chair?" he whispered to Mr. Verner. "She looks too shaky to stand."

"Ay," acquiesced Mr. Verner. "Some one bring forward a chair. Sit down, Mrs. Roy."

Mrs. Roy obeyed. One of those harmless, well-meaning, timid women, who seem not to possess an idea of their own, and are content to submit to others, she had often been seen in a shaky state from very trifling causes. But she had never been seen like this. The perspiration stood upon her pinched face, and her blue check apron was incessantly raised to it.

"What errand had you near the Willow Pond this evening?" asked Mr. Verner.

"I didn't see anything," she gasped; "I don't know anything. As true as I sit here, sir, I never saw Rachel Frost this blessed evening."

"I am not asking you about Rachel Frost. *Were* you near the spot?"

"Yes. But——"

"Then you can say what errand you had there; what business took you to it," continued Mr. Verner.

"It was no harm took me, sir. I went to have a dish o' tea with Martha Broom. Many's the time she has asked me since Christmas; and my husband, he was out with the Dawsons and all that bother; and Luke, he's gone, and there was nothing to keep me at home. I changed my gownd and I went."

"What time was that?"

"'Twas the middle o' the afternoon, sir. The clock had gone three."

"Did you stay tea there?"

"Of course, sir, I did. Broom, he was out, and she was at home by herself, rinsing out some things. But she soon put 'em away, and we sat down and had our teas together. We was talking about——"

"Never mind that," said Mr. Verner. "It was in coming home, I conclude, that you were met by young Broom."

Mrs. Roy raised her apron again, and passed it over her face; but not a word spoke she in answer.

"What time did you leave Broom's cottage to return home?"

"I can't be sure, sir, what time it was. Brooms' haven't got no clock: they tell the time by the sun."

"Was it dark?"

"Oh yes, it was dark, sir: except for the moon. That had been up a good bit, for I hadn't hurried myself."

"And what did you see or hear, when you drew near the Willow Pond!"

The question sent Mrs. Roy into fresh tears; fresh tremor.

"I never saw nothing," she reiterated. "The last time I set eyes on Rachel Frost was at church on Sunday."

"What is the matter with you?" cried Mr. Verner, with severity. "Do you mean to deny that anything had occurred to put you in a state of agitation, when you were met by young Broom?"

Mrs. Roy only moaned.

"Did you hear people quarrelling?" he persisted.

"I heard people quarrelling," she sobbed. "I did. But I never saw, no more than the dead, who it was."

"Whose voices were they?"

"How can I tell, sir? I wasn't near enough. There were two voices, a man's and a woman's; but I couldn't catch a single word, and it did not last long. I declare, if it were the last word I had to speak, that I heard no more of the quarrel than that, and I wasn't no nearer to it."

She really did seem to speak the truth, in spite of her shrinking fear, which was evident to all. Mr. Verner inquired, with incredulity equally evident, whether that was sufficient to put her into the state of agitation spoken of by young Broom.

Mrs. Roy hung her head.

"I'm timid at quarrels, 'specially if it's at night," she faintly answered.

"And was it simply hearing that quarrel that made you sink down on your knees, and clasp a tree?" continued Mr. Verner. Upon which Mrs. Roy let her head fall on her hands, and sobbed piteously.

Robin Frost interrupted, sarcasm in his tone. "There's a tale going on, outside, that you saw a ghost, and it was that as frighted you," he said to her. "Perhaps, sir"—turning to Mr. Verner—"you'll ask her whose ghost it was."

This appeared to give the finishing touch to Mrs. Roy's discomfiture. Nothing could be made of her for a few minutes. Presently, her agitation somewhat subsided; she lifted her head, and spoke as with a desperate effort.

"It's true," she said. "I'll make a clean breast of it. I did see a ghost, and it was that upset me so. It wasn't the quarrelling frighted me: I thought nothing of that."

"What do you mean by saying you saw a ghost?" sharply reproved Mr. Verner.

"It was a ghost, sir," she answered, apparently recovering a little courage, now that the subject was fairly entered upon.

A pause ensued. Mr. Verner may have been at a loss what to say next. When deliberately assured by any nervous spirit that they have "seen a ghost," it is waste of time to enter an opposing argument.

"Where did you see the ghost?" he asked.

"I had stopped still, listening to the quarrelling, sir. But that soon came to an end, for I heard no more, and I went on a few steps, and then I stopped to listen again. Just as I turned my head towards the grove, where the quarrelling had seemed to be, I saw something a few paces from me that made my flesh creep. A tall, white thing it looked, whiter than the moonlight. I knew it could be nothing but a ghost, and my knees sank down from under me, and I laid hold o' the tree."

"Perhaps it was a death's-head and cross-bones?" cried John Massingbird.

"Maybe, sir," she answered. "That, or something worse. It glided through the trees with its great eyes staring at me; and I felt ready to die."

"Was it a man's or a woman's ghost?" asked Mr. Bitterworth, a broad smile upon his face.

"Couldn't have been a woman's, sir; 'twas too tall," was the sobbing answer. "A great tall thing it looked, like a white shadder. I wonder I be alive!"

"So do I," irascibly cried Mr. Verner. "Which way was it going? Towards the village, or in this direction?"

"Not in either of 'em, sir. It glided right off at an angle amid the trees."

"And it was that—that folly, that put you into the state of tremor in which Broom found you?" said Mr. Verner. "It was nothing else?"

"I declare, before Heaven, that it was what I saw as put me into the fright young Broom found me in," she repeated earnestly.

"But if you were so silly as to be alarmed for the moment, why do you continue to show alarm still?"

"Because my husband says he'll shake me," she whimpered, after a long pause. "He never has no patience with ghosts."

"Serve you right," was the half-audible comment of Mr. Verner. "Is this all you know of the affair?" he continued, after a pause.

"It's all, sir," she sobbed. "And enough too. There's only one thing as I shall be for ever thankful for."

"What's that?" asked Mr. Verner.

"That my poor Luke was away afore this happened. He was fond of hankering after Rachel, and folks might have been for laying it on his shoulders; though, goodness knows, he'd not have hurt a hair of her head."

"At any rate he is out of it," observed John Massingbird.

"Ay," she replied, in a sort of soliloquy, as she turned to leave the room, for Mr. Verner told her she was dismissed: "it'll be a corn o' comfort amid my peck o' troubles. I have fretted myself incessant

since Luke left, thinking as I could never know comfort again; but perhaps it's all for the best now, as he should ha' went."

She curtsied, and the door was closed upon her. Her evidence left an unsatisfactory feeling behind it.

An impression had gone forth that Mrs. Roy could throw some light upon the obscurity; and, as it turned out, she had thrown none. The greater part of those present gave credence to what she said. All believed the "ghost" to have been pure imagination; knowing the woman's proneness to the marvellous, and her timid temperament. But, upon one or two there remained a strong conviction that Mrs. Roy had not told the whole truth; that she could have said a great deal more about that night's work, had she chosen to do so.

No other testimony was forthcoming. The cries and shouts of young Broom, when he saw the body in the water, had succeeded in arousing some men who slept at the distant brick-kilns; and the tidings soon spread, and crowds flocked up. These crowds were eager to pour into Mr. Verner's room now, and state all *they* knew, which was precisely the evidence not required; but of further testimony to the facts there were none.

"More may come out prior to the inquest; there's no knowing," observed Mr. Bitterworth, as the gentlemen stood in a group before separating. "It is a very dreadful thing; demanding the most searching investigation. It is not likely she would throw herself in."

"A well-conducted girl like Rachel Frost throw herself wilfully into a pond for the purpose of drowning herself!" indignantly repeated Mr. Verner. "She would be one of the last to do it."

"And equally one of the last to be thrown in," said Dr. West. "Young women do not get thrown into ponds without some cause; and I should think few ever gave less cause for maltreatment of any kind than she. It appears most strange to me with whom she could have been quarrelling—if indeed it was Rachel that was quarrelling."

"It is all strange together," cried Lionel Verner. "What took Rachel that way at all, at night-time?"

"What indeed!" echoed Mr. Bitterworth. "Unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Mr. Verner; for Mr. Bitterworth had brought his words to a sudden ending.

"Well, I was going to say, unless she had an appointment there. But that does not appear probable with Rachel Frost."

"It is barely possible, let alone probable," was the retort of Mr. Verner.

"But still, in a case like this, every circumstance must be looked at, every trifle weighed," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "Does Rachel's own conduct appear to you to have been perfectly open? She has been indulging, it would seem, in some secret grief latterly; has

been 'strange,' as one or two have expressed it. Then, again, she stated to her brother that she was going to stay at Duff's for a gossip, whereas the woman says she had evidently no intention of gossiping, and barely gave herself time to order the articles spoken of. Other witnesses observed her leaving Duff's, walk with a hasty step towards the field road, and turn down it. All this does not sound quite clear to me."

"There was one thing sounded not clear to me," broke in Lionel, abruptly, "and that was Dinah Roy's evidence. The woman's half a fool; otherwise I should think she was purposely deceiving us."

"A pity but she could see a real ghost!" cried John Massingbird, looking inclined to laugh. "It might cure her of seeing fancy ones. She's right in one thing, however: that poor Luke might have got this clapped on to his shoulders had he been here."

"Scarcely," dissented Dr. West. "Luke Roy is too inoffensive to harm any one, least of all a woman, and Rachel; and that the whole parish knows."

"There's no need to discuss Luke's name in the business," said Mr. Verner: "he is far enough away. Whoever the man may have been, it was not Luke," he emphatically added. "Luke would have been the one to succour Rachel, not to injure her."

Not a soul present but felt that Mr. Verner spoke in strict accordance with the facts, known and presumptive. They must look in another quarter than Luke for Rachel's assailant.

Mr. Verner glanced at Mr. Bitterworth and Dr. West, then at the three young men before him.

"We are amongst friends," he observed, addressing the latter. "I would ask you, individually, whether it was one of you that the boy, Duff, spoke of as being in the lane?"

They positively disclaimed it, each one for himself. Each one mentioned that he had been elsewhere at the time; and where he had been.

"You see," said Mr. Verner, "the lane leads only to Verner's Pride."

"But by leaping a fence, or a gate, or breaking through a hedge, it may lead all over the country," observed Frederick Massingbird. "You forget that, sir."

"No, Frederick, I do not forget it. But unless a man had business at Verner's Pride, what should he go into the lane for? On emerging from the field on this side the Willow Pond, any one, not bound for Verner's Pride, would take the ordinary path to the right, open to all; only in case of wanting to come here would he take the lane. You cannot suppose for a moment that I suspect any one of you of having had a hand in this unhappy affair; but it was

right that I should be assured, from your own lips, that you were not the person spoken of by young Duff."

"It may have been a stranger to the neighbourhood, sir. In that case he would not know that the lane led only to Verner's Pride."

"True—so far. But what stranger would be likely to quarrel with Rachel?"

"Egad, if you come to that, sir, a stranger's more likely to pick a quarrel with her than one of us," rejoined John Massingbird.

"It was no stranger," said Mr. Verner, shaking his head. "We do not *quarrel* with strangers. Had any stranger accosted Rachel at night in that lonely spot, with rude words, she would naturally have called out for help: which it is certain she did not do, or young Broom and Mrs. Roy must have heard her. Rely upon it, that man in the lane is the one we must look for."

"But look where?" debated Frederick Massingbird.

"There it is! The inference would be that he was coming to Verner's Pride; being on its direct way and nearly close upon it. But, the only tall men (as the boy describes) at Verner's Pride, are you three and Bennet. Bennet was at home, therefore he is exempt; and you were scattered in different directions—Lionel at Mr. Bitterworth's, John at the Royal Oak—I wonder you like to make yourself so familiar with those tap-rooms, John!—and Frederick coming in from Poynton's to dinner."

"I don't think I had been in ten minutes when the alarm came," remarked Frederick.

"Well, it is involved in mystery at present," cried Mr. Bitterworth, shaking hands with them. "Let us hope that to-morrow will throw more light upon it. Are you on the wing, too, doctor? Then we'll go out together."

CHAPTER VII.

THE REVELATION AT THE INQUEST.

To say that Deerham was rudely disturbed in its equanimity; that petty animosities, whether concerning Mr. Roy and the Dawsons or other contending spirits, were lost sight of in the absorbing calamity which had overtaken Rachel; to say that occupations were partially suspended, and there ensued a glorious interim of idleness, for the female portion of it,—of conferences at doorways and gatherings in houses; to say that Rachel was sincerely mourned, old Frost sympathized with, and the supposed assailant vigorously sought for, would be sufficient to indicate that public curiosity was excited to a very high point. But all this was as nothing, compared

with the excitement that was to ensue, upon the evidence given at the coroner's inquest.

In the absence of anything certain to go upon, Deerham had been content to take uncertain data, and to come to its own conclusions. Deerham assumed that Rachel, from reasons which they could not fathom, had taken the lonely road home that night, had met with some one or other with whom had ensued a quarrel and scuffle, and that, accidentally or of intent, she had been pushed into the pond, the coward decamping.

"Villainy enough! even if it was but an accident!" cried wrathful Deerham.

Villainy enough, beyond all doubt, had this been its extent. But, Deerham had to learn that the villainy had had a beginning before that.

The inquest had been summoned in due course. It sat two days after the accident. No further evidence, tending to throw more light upon the matter, was given than had been elicited that first night before Mr. Verner; except the medical evidence. Dr. West and a surgeon from a neighbouring town, who had conjointly made the *post-mortem* examination, testified that there was a cause for Rachel Frost's unevenness of spirits, alluded to by her father and by Mrs. Verner. She might possibly, they now thought, have thrown herself into the pool; induced thereto by self-condemnation.

It electrified Deerham. It electrified Mr. Verner. It more than electrified Matthew Frost and Robin. In the first impulse of the news, Mrs. Verner declared that it *could not be.* But the medical men, with their impassive faces, calmly said that *it was.*

But, so far as the inquiry went, it only left the point where it found it. For, if it tended to induce a suspicion that Rachel might have found life a burthen, and so wished to end it, this only rendered stronger the suspicion against another. This supplied the very motive for that other's conduct, which had been wanting, supposing that he had indeed got rid of her by violence. It gave the clue to much which had before been dark. People could understand now why Rachel should hasten to keep a secret appointment; why quarrelling should be heard; in short, why poor Rachel should have been found in the pond. The jury returned an open verdict—"Found drowned; but how she got into the water, there was no precise evidence to show."

Robin Frost struggled out of the room as the crowd was dispersing. His eye was blazing, his cheek burning. Could Robin have laid his hand at that moment upon the right man, there would speedily have ensued another coroner's inquest. The earth was not wide enough for the two to live on it. Fortunately, Robin could not fix upon any one, and say, Thou art the man! The knowledge was hidden

from him. And yet, the very man might have been at the inquest, side by side with himself. Nay, he probably *was*.

Robin Frost cleared himself from the crowd. He gave vent to a groan of despair; he lifted his strong arms in impotency. Then he turned and sought Mr. Verner.

Mr. Verner was ill; could not be seen. Lionel came forward.

"Robin, I am truly sorry; truly grieved. We all are. But I know you will not care to-day to hear me say it."

"Sir, I wanted to see Mr. Verner," replied Robin. "I want to know if that inquest can be squashed." Don't laugh at him now, poor fellow. He meant quashed.

"The inquest quashed!" repeated Lionel. "Of course it cannot be. I don't know what you mean, Robin. It has been held, and it cannot be undone."

"I should have said the verdict," explained Robin. "I'm beside myself to-day, Mr. Lionel. Can't Mr. Verner get it squashed? He knows the crowner."

"Neither Mr. Verner nor any one else could do it, Robin. Why should you wish it done?"

"Because it as good as sets forth a lie," vehemently answered Robin Frost. "She never threw herself into the water. Bad as things had turned out with her, poor dear, she never did that. Mr. Lionel, I ask you, sir, was she likely to do it?"

"I should have deemed it very unlikely," replied Lionel. "Until to-day," he added to himself.

"No, she never did! Was it the work of one to go and buy herself aprons, and tape, and cotton for sewing, who was on her way to fling herself into a pond, I'd ask the crowner?'" he continued, his voice rising almost to a shriek in his emotion. "Them aprons are a proof that *she* didn't take her own life. Why didn't they bring it in Wilful Murder, and have the place scoured to find him?"

"The verdict will make no difference to finding him, Robin," returned Lionel Verner.

"I dun know that, sir. When a charge of wilful murder's out in a place, again some one of the folks in it, the rest be all on edge to find him: but 'Found drowned' is another thing. Have you any suspicion against anybody, sir?"

He asked the question sharply, abruptly, and Lionel Verner looked full in his face as he answered. "No, Robin."

"Well, good afternoon, sir."

He turned away without another word. Lionel gazed after him with true sympathy. "He will never recover this blow," was Lionel Verner's mental comment.

But for this unfortunate occurrence, John Massingbird would already have departed from Verner's Pride. The great bane of the

two Massingbirds was, that they had been brought up to be idle men. A sum of money had become theirs when Frederick came of age—which sum you will call large or small, as it may please you. It would be as a drop to the ocean to the millionaire; it would be a fortune to one in poverty. We estimate things by comparison. The sum was five thousand pounds each—Mrs. Massingbird, by her second marriage with Mr. Verner, having forfeited all right in it. With this sum the young Massingbirds appeared to think that they could live as gentlemen, and need not seek to add to it.

Thrown into the luxurious home of Verner's Pride—again we must speak by comparison: Verner's Pride was luxurious compared with the moderate home they had been reared in—John and Frederick Massingbird suffered that worst of all complaints, indolence, to overtake them and become their master. John, careless, free, unsteady in many ways, began to spend his portion as fast as he could do so; Frederick, more cold, more cautious, did not squander as his brother did, but he had managed to get rid of a considerable amount of his own share in unfortunate speculations. While losses do not affect our personal comfort they are scarcely felt. And so it was with the Massingbirds. Mr. Verner was an easy man in regard to money matters; he was also a man who was particularly sensitive to the feelings of other people, and he had never breathed a word to his wife about the inexpediency of keeping her sons at home in idleness. He feared his motives might be misconstrued—that it might be thought he grudged to keep them. He had spoken once or twice of the desirability of their following some calling in life, and intimated that he should be ready to further their views by pecuniary help, but the advice was not taken. He offered to purchase a commission for one or both of them; he hinted that the Bar afforded a stepping-stone to fame. No; John and Frederick Massingbird were conveniently deaf to advice; they had grown addicted to field-sports, to a life of leisure, and they did not feel inclined to quit it for one of labour. So they stayed on at Verner's Pride, enjoying their comfortable quarters, the well-spread table, their horses and dogs. All these sources of expense were provided without any cost or concern of theirs, their own private expenditure alone coming out of their private purses.

John—who was naturally of a roving nature, and but for the comfortable home he was allowed to call his, would probably have been all over the world before he was his present age, working in his shirt-sleeves for bread one day, exalted to some passing luck the next—had latterly taken a fancy in his head to emigrate to Australia. Certain friends of his had gone out there a year or two before, and were sending home flaming accounts of their success at the gold-fields. It excited in John Massingbird a strong wish to

join them. Possibly other circumstances urged him to the step; for, that his finances were not in so flourishing a state as they might be, was certain. With John Massingbird, to wish a thing was to do it; and almost before the plan was spoken of, even in his own family, he was ready to start. Frederick was in his confidence, Lionel partly so, and a hint to his mother was sufficient to induce her to preserve reticence on the subject. John Massingbird had his reasons for this. It was announced in the household that Mr. Massingbird was departing on a visit to town, the only one who was told the truth being Rachel Frost. Rachel was looked upon almost as one of themselves. Frederick Massingbird had also confided it to Sibylla West—but Frederick and Sibylla were on more confidential terms than was suspected by the world. John had made a confidant on his own score, and that was Luke Roy. Luke, despised by Rachel, whom he truly loved, clearly seeing there was no hope whatever that she would ever favour him, was eager to get away from Deerham—anywhere, so that he might forget her. John Massingbird knew this; he liked Luke, and he thought Luke might prove useful to him in the land to which he was emigrating, so he proposed to him to join in the scheme. Luke warmly embraced it. Old Roy, whom they were obliged to take into confidence, was won over to it. He furnished Luke with the necessary funds, believing he should be repaid fourfold, for John Massingbird had contrived to imbue him with the firm conviction that gold was to be picked up for the stooping.

Only three days before the tragic event occurred to Rachel, Luke had been despatched to London by John Massingbird to put things in a train of preparation for the voyage. Luke said nothing abroad of his going, and the village only knew he was away by missing him.

"What's gone of Luke?" many asked of his father.

"Oh, he's off to London on some spree; he can tell ye about it when he gets back," was Roy's answer.

When he got back! John's departure was intended for the day following the one when you saw him packing his clothes, but Rachel's untimely end had induced him to postpone it. Or, rather, the command of Mr. Verner; a command which John could not conveniently disobey, had he wished to do so. He had persuaded Mr. Verner to promise him a substantial sum, to "set him up," as he phrased it, in Australia; and that sum was not yet handed to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROBIN'S VOW.

THE revelation at the inquest had affected Mr. Verner in no measured degree, greatly increasing for the time his bodily ailments. He gave orders to be denied to all callers; he could not bear the comments that would be made. An angry, feverish desire to find out who had played the traitor grew strong within him. Innocent, pretty, child-like Rachel! who was it that had set himself, in his wickedness, deliberately to destroy her? Mr. Verner now deemed it more than likely that she had been the author of her own death. It was of course impossible to tell: but he dwelt on that part of the tragedy less than on the other. The one injury was uncertain; the other was a fact.

What rendered it all the more obscure, was the absence of any previous grounds of suspicion. Rachel had never been observed to be on terms of intimacy with any one. Luke Roy had been anxious to court her, as Verner's Pride knew; but Rachel had utterly repudiated his advances. Luke it was not. And, who else was there?

Mr. Verner's suspicions veered, almost against his will, towards those of his own household. Not to Lionel; he honestly believed Lionel to be too high-principled: but towards his step-sons. He had no particular cause to suspect either of them: unless the testimony of Mrs. Duff's son about the tall gentleman could furnish it: and it may be said that his suspicion strayed to them only from the total absence of any other quarter to throw it upon. Of the two, he could rather suspect John than Frederick. No scandal, touching Frederick, had ever reached his ears: plenty of it touching John. In fact, Mr. Verner had been rather glad to help in shipping John off to some far-away place, for he considered him no credit to Verner's Pride, or any benefit to the neighbourhood. Venial sins sat lightly on the conscience of John Massingbird.

But this was no venial sin, no passing scandal: and Mr. Verner declared to that gentleman that if he found him guilty, he would discard him from Verner's Pride without a shilling of help. John Massingbird protested, in the strongest terms, that he was innocent as Mr. Verner himself.

A trifling addition was destined to be brought to the suspicion already directed by Mr. Verner towards Verner's Pride. On the night of the inquest Mr. Verner had his dinner served to him in his study. Mrs. Tynn attended upon him: he liked her to do so when he was worse than usual. He was used to her, and would talk to

her when he would not talk to others. He spoke about what had happened, saying that he felt as if it would shorten his life. He would give anything, he added, half in soliloquy, to have the point cleared up as to who it was young Duff had seen in the lane. Mrs. Tynn answered this, lowering her voice.

"It was one of our young gentlemen, sir; there's no doubt of it. Dolly saw one of them come in."

"Dolly did?" echoed Mr. Verner.

Mrs. Tynn proceeded to explain. Dolly, the dairymaid at Verner's Pride, was sufficiently ill-conducted (as Mrs. Tynn would tell her, for the fact did not give that ruling matron pleasure) to have a sweetheart. Worse still, Dolly was in the habit of stealing out to meet him when he left work, which was at eight o'clock. On the evening of the tragedy, Dolly, abandoning her dairy, and braving the wrath of Mrs. Tynn, should she be discovered, stole out to a sheltered spot in the rear of the house, the usual meeting-place. Scarcely was she ensconced here when the swain arrived; who, it may be remarked in passing, filled the important post of waggoner to Mr. Bitterworth. The spot was close to the small green gate which led to the lane already spoken of; it led to that only; and, while he and Dolly were talking and making love, after their own rustic fashion, they saw Dan Duff come from the direction of the house, and pass through the gate, whistling. A short time after this the gate was heard to open again. Dolly looked out, and saw what she took to be one of the gentlemen come in, *from* the lane, walking very fast. Dolly looked casually, the moonlight was obscured, and she did not particularly notice *which* of them it was; whether Mr. Lionel, or either of Mrs. Verner's sons. But the impression received into her mind was, that it was one of the three; and Dolly could not be persuaded out of that to this very day.

"Hush—sh—sh!" cried she to her sweetheart, "it's one o' the young masters."

The steps passed quickly on: but whether they turned into the yard, or into the side path which conducted round to the front entrance, or bore right across, and so went out into the public road, Dolly did not notice. Very shortly after this—time passes swiftly when people are courting, of which fact the Italians have a proverb—Dan Duff came bursting back again, with the tidings about Rachel Frost. This was the substance of what Mrs. Tynn told Mr. Verner.

"Dolly said nothing of this before!" he exclaimed.

"Not she, sir. She didn't dare confess that she'd been off all that while from her dairy. She let drop a word, and I have got it out of her piecemeal. I have threatened her, sir, that if ever she mentions it again, I'll get her turned off."

"Why did you threaten her?" he hastily asked.

Mrs. Tynn dropped her voice. "I thought it might not be pleasant to have it talked of, sir. *She* thinks I'm only afraid of the neglect of work getting to the ears of Mrs. Verner."

This was the trifling addition. Not very much in itself, but it helped to bear out the doubts Mr. Verner already entertained. Was it John or was it Frederick who had come in? Or was it—Lionel? There appeared to be no more certainty that it was one than another. Mr. Verner had minutely inquired into the proceedings of John and Frederick Massingbird that night, and he had come to the conclusion that both could have been in the lane at that particular hour. Frederick, before entering the house for dinner, after he had left the veterinary surgeon's, Poynton; John, before he paid his visit to the Royal Oak. John appeared to have called in at several places, and his account was not particularly clear. Lionel, Mr. Verner had not thought it necessary to question. He sent for him as soon as he had dined; it was as well to be indisputably sure of him before advancing the charge on either of the others.

"Sit down, Lionel," said Mr. Verner. "I want to talk to you. Had you finished dinner?"

"Quite, thank you. You look ill to-night," Lionel added, as he drew a chair to the fire; and his tone insensibly became gentle, as he gazed on his uncle's pale face.

"How can I look otherwise? This trouble is worrying me to death. Lionel, I have discovered, beyond doubt, that it was one of you young men who was in the lane that night."

Lionel, who was then leaning over the fire, turned his head with a quick, surprised gesture towards Mr. Verner. The latter proceeded to tell Lionel the substance of the communication made to him by Mrs. Tynn. Lionel sat, bending forward, his elbow on his knee, and his fingers mechanically running through the curls of his dark chestnut hair, as he listened to it. He did not interrupt the narrative, or speak at its conclusion.

"You see, Lionel, it appears certain to have been some one belonging to this house."

"Yes, sir. Unless Dolly was mistaken."

"Mistaken as to what?" sharply asked Mr. Verner, who, when he made up his own mind that a thing was so-and-so, could not bear to be opposed. "Mistaken that some one came in at the gate?"

"I do not see how she could be mistaken in that," replied Lionel. "I meant mistaken as to its being any one belonging to the house."

"*Is* it likely that any one would come in at that gate at night, unless they belonged to the house, or were coming to the house?" retorted Mr. Verner. "Would a stranger drop from the clouds to

come in at it? Or was it Mrs. Roy's 'ghost,' think you?" he sarcastically added.

Lionel did not answer. He vacantly ran his fingers through his hair, apparently in thought.

"I have abstained from asking you the explicit details of your movements on that evening," continued Mr. Verner, "but I must demand them of you now."

Lionel started up, his cheek on fire. "Sir," he uttered with emotion, "you cannot suspect *me* of having taken act or part in it! I declare, before Heaven, that Rachel was as sacred for me——"

"Softly, Lionel," interrupted Mr. Verner, "there's no cause for you to break your head against a wall. It is not you whom I suspect—thank God! But I wish to be sure of your movements—to be able to speak of them as certain, you understand, before I accuse another."

"I will willingly tell you every movement of mine that evening, so far as I remember," said Lionel, resuming his calmness. "I came home when dinner was half over. I had been detained—but you know all that," he broke off. "When you left the dining-room, I went on the terrace, and sat there smoking a cigar. I should think I stayed there an hour, or more; and then I went upstairs, changed my coat, and proceeded to Mr. Bitterworth's."

"What took you to Mr. Bitterworth's that evening, Lionel?"

Lionel hesitated. He did not choose to say, "Because I knew Sibylla West was to be there:" but that would have been the true answer. "I had nothing particular to do with my evening, so I went up," he said aloud. "Mr. Bitterworth was out. Mrs. Bitterworth thought he had gone into Deerham."

"Yes. He was at Deerham when the alarm was given, and hastened on here. Sibylla West was there, was she not?"

"She was there," said Lionel. "She had promised to be home early; and, as no one came for her, I saw her home. It was after I left her that I heard what had occurred."

"About what time did you get there—I mean to Bitterworth's?" questioned Mr. Verner, who appeared to have his thoughts filled with other things at that moment than with Sibylla West.

"I cannot be sure," replied Lionel. "I think it must have been nine o'clock. I went into Deerham to the post-office first, and then came back to Bitterworth's."

Mr. Verner mused.

"Lionel," he observed, "it is a curious thing, but there's not one of you but might have been the party to the quarrel that night; so far as that your time cannot be positively accounted for by minutes and by hours. I mean, were the accusation brought publicly against

you, you would, none of you, be able to prove a distinct *alibi*, as it seems to me. For instance, who is to prove that you did not, when you were sitting on the terrace, steal across to a rendezvous at the Willow Pond, or cut across to it when you were at the post-office at Deerham?"

"I certainly did *not*," said Lionel, quietly, taking the remarks only as they were meant—as an illustration. "It might, sir, as you observe, be difficult to prove a decided *alibi*. But——" he rose and bent to Mr. Verner with a bright smile, a clear, truthful eye—"I do not think you need one to believe me."

"No, Lionel, I do not. Is John Massingbird in the dining-room?"

"He was when I left it."

"Then go and send him in to me."

John Massingbird was found and despatched to Mr. Verner, without any reluctance on his own part. He had been bestowing hard words upon Lionel for "taking up the time of the old man" just on the evening when he wanted to take it up himself. The truth was, John Massingbird was intending to depart the following morning, the Fates and Mr. Verner permitting him.

Their interview was a long one. Two hours, full, had they been closeted together when Robin Frost made his appearance again at Verner's Pride, and craved once more an interview with Mr. Verner. "If it was only for a minute—only for a minute!" he implored.

Under the circumstances, the overwhelming sorrow which had fallen on the man, Lionel did not like again to deny him without first asking Mr. Verner. He went himself to the study.

"Come in," called out Mr. Verner, in answer to the knock.

He was sitting in his chair as usual; John Massingbird was standing up, his elbow on the mantel-piece. That their conversation must have been of an exciting nature was evident, and Lionel could not help noticing the signs. John Massingbird had a scarlet streak on his sallow cheek, never seen there above once or twice in his life, and then caused by deep emotion. Mr. Verner, on his part, looked livid as clay. Robin Frost might come in.

Lionel called him, and he came in with Frederick Massingbird.

The man could hardly speak for agitation. He believed the verdict could not be set aside, he said: others had told him so besides Mr. Lionel. He had come to ask if Mr. Verner would offer a reward.

"A reward!" repeated Mr. Verner, mechanically, with the air of a man whose mind is far away.

"If you'd please to offer it, sir, I'd work the flesh off my bones to pay it back again," he urged. "I'll live upon a crust myself,

and I'll keep my home upon a crust, but what I'll get it up. If there's a reward offered, sir, we might come upon the villain."

Mr. Verner appeared, then, to awake to the question before him, and to awake to it in terrible excitement.

"He'll never be found, Robin,—the villain will never be found, so long as you and I and the world shall last!"

They looked at him in consternation; Lionel, Frederick Massingbird, and Robin Frost. Mr. Verner recollected himself, and calmed his spirit down.

"I mean, Robin," he more quietly said, "that a reward will be useless. The villain has been too cunning, rely upon it, to—to—leave his traces behind him."

"It might be tried, sir," respectfully urged Robin. "I'd work——"

"You can come up to-morrow, Robin, and I'll talk with you," interrupted Mr. Verner. "I am too ill—too much upset to-night. Come at any hour you please, after twelve, and I will see you."

"I'll come, sir. I've registered a vow before my old father," went on Robin, lifting his right arm, "and I register it again before you, sir,—before our future master, Mr. Lionel,—that I'll never leave a stone unturned by night nor by day,—that I'll make it my first and foremost business in life to find that man. And when I've found him—let him be who he will—either him or me shall die. So help me——"

"Be still, Robin!" passionately interposed Mr. Verner, in a voice that startled the man. "Vows are bad things. I have found them so."

"It was registered before, sir," significantly answered Robin, as he turned away. "I'll be up here to-morrow."

The morrow brought forth two departures from Verner's Pride. John Massingbird started for London in pursuit of his journey, Mr. Verner having behaved to him liberally. And Lionel Verner was summoned in hot haste to Paris, where his brother had just met with an accident, and was supposed to be lying between life and death.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. VERNER'S ESTRANGEMENT.

THE preceding chapters may be looked upon somewhat in the light of an introduction to what is to follow. It was necessary to relate the events recorded in them; but we must take a leap of not far short of two years from the date of their occurrence.

John Massingbird and his attendant, Luke Roy, had arrived safely in Melbourne in due course. Luke had written home one letter to his mother, and there his correspondence ended; but John Massingbird wrote frequently, both to Mrs. Verner and to his brother Frederick. John, according to his own account, appeared to be getting on all one way: the money he took out had served him well: he had made good use of it, and was rapidly accumulating a fortune. Such was his statement: but whether implicit reliance might be placed upon it was a question. Gay John was apt to deceive himself; was given to look on the bright side of life, and imbue things with a tinge of *couleur-de-rose;* when, for less sanguine eyes, the tinge would have shone out decidedly yellow. The time went on, and his last account told of a "glorious nugget" he had picked up at the diggings. "Almost as big as his head," a "fortune in itself," ran some of the phrases in his letters; and his intention was to go down himself to Melbourne and "realize the thousands" for it. His letter to Frederick was especially full of this; and he strongly recommended his brother to go out and pick up nuggets on his own score. Frederick Massingbird appeared very much inclined to take the hint.

"Were I only sure it was all gospel, I'd go to-morrow," observed Frederick Massingbird to Lionel Verner, one day that the discussion of the contents of John's letter had been renewed, a month or two after its arrival. "A year's luck, such as this, and a man might come home a millionaire. I wish I knew whether to put entire faith in it."

"Why should John deceive you?" asked Lionel.

"He wouldn't deceive me wilfully. He has no reason for deceiving *me*. The question is, is he deceived himself? Remember what grand schemes he would now and then become wild upon here, saying and thinking he had found the philosopher's stone. And how would they turn out? This may be one of the same kind. I wonder we did not hear again by last month's mail."

"There's a mail due now."

"I know there is," said Frederick. "Should it bring news to confirm this, I shall go out to him."

"The worst is, those diggings appear to be all a lottery," remarked Lionel. "Where one gets his pockets lined, another starves. Nay, ten—fifty--more, for all we know, starve for the one lucky one. I should not, myself, feel inclined to risk the journey to them."

"*You!* It's not likely you would," was the reply of Frederick Massingbird. "Every one was not born heir to Verner's Pride."

Lionel laughed pleasantly. They were pacing the terrace in the sunshine of a winter's afternoon: a crisp, cold, bright day in January. At that moment Tynn came out of the house and approached them.

"My master is up, sir, and would like the paper read to him," said he, addressing Frederick Massingbird.

"Oh, bother, I can't stop now," broke from that gentleman, involuntarily. "Tynn, you need not say that you found me here. I have an appointment, and I must hasten to keep it."

Lionel Verner looked at his watch.

"I can spare half-an-hour," he observed to himself: and he proceeded to Mr. Verner's room.

The old study that you have seen before. And there sat Mr. Verner in the same arm-chair, cushioned and padded more than it used to be. What a change there was in him! Shrunken, wasted, drawn: surely there would be no place very long in this world for Mr. Verner.

He was leaning forward in his chair, his back bowed, his hands resting on his stick, stretched out before him. He lifted his head when Lionel entered, and an expression, partly of displeasure, partly of pain, passed over his countenance.

"Where's Frederick?" he sharply asked.

"Frederick has an appointment, sir. I will read to you."

"I thought you were going down to your mother's," rejoined Mr. Verner, his accent not softening in the least.

"I need not go for this half-hour," replied Lionel, taking up the *Times*, which lay on a table near Mr. Verner. "Have you looked at the headings of the news, sir; or shall I go over them for you, and then you can tell me what you wish read?"

"I don't want anything read by you," said Mr. Verner. "Put the paper down."

Lionel did not immediately obey. A shade of mortification had crossed his face.

"Do you hear me, Lionel? Put the paper down. You know how it fidgets me to hear those papers ruffled, when I am not in a mood for reading."

Lionel rose, and stood before Mr. Verner. "Uncle, I *wish* you would let me do something for you. Better send me out of the house altogether, than treat me with this estrangement. Will it be of any use my asking you, for the hundredth time, what I have done to displease you?"

"I tell you I don't want the paper read," said Mr. Verner. "And if you'd leave me alone I should be glad. Perhaps I shall get a wink of sleep. All night, all night, and my eyes never closed! It's time I was gone."

The concluding sentences were spoken as in soliloquy; not to Lionel. Lionel, who knew his uncle's every mood, quitted the room. As he closed the door, a heavy groan, born of displeasure mingled with pain, as the greeting look had been, was sent after him by Mr.

Verner. Very emphatically did it express his state of feeling with regard to Lionel; and Lionel felt it keenly.

Lionel Verner had remained in Paris six months, when summoned thither by the accident to his brother. The accident need not have detained him half that time; but the seductions of the gay French capital had charms for Lionel. From the very hour that he set foot in Verner's Pride on his return, he found that Mr. Verner's behaviour had altered to him. He showed bitter, angry estrangement, and Lionel could only conceive one cause for it—his long sojourn abroad. Fifteen or sixteen months had now elapsed since his return, and the estrangement had not lessened. In vain Lionel sought an explanation. Mr. Verner would not enter upon it. In fact, so far as direct words went, Mr. Verner had not expressed much of his displeasure: he left it to his manner. That said enough. He had never dropped the slightest allusion as to its cause. When Lionel asked an explanation, he neither accorded nor denied it, but would put him off with evasions; as he might have put off a child who asked a troublesome question. You have now seen him do so once again.

After his rebuff, Lionel was crossing the hall, when he suddenly halted, as if a thought struck him, and he turned back to the study. If ever a man's attitude bespoke utter grief and prostration, Mr. Verner's did, as Lionel opened the door. His head and hands had fallen, and his stick had dropped upon the carpet. He started out of his reverie at the appearance of Lionel, and made an effort to recover his stick. Lionel hastened to pick it up for him.

"I have been thinking, sir, that it might be well for Decima to go in the carriage to the station to receive Miss Tempest. Shall I order it?"

"Order anything you like; order all Verner's Pride—what does it matter? Better for some of us, perhaps, that it had never existed."

Hastily, abruptly, carelessly was the answer given: there was no mistaking that Mr. Verner was nearly beside himself with mental pain.

Lionel went round to the stables, to give the order he had suggested. One great feature in the character of Lionel Verner was his complete absence of assumption. Courteous and refined in mind and feelings, he could not have presumed: others, in his position, might have deemed they were only exercising a right. Though heir-presumptive to Verner's Pride, living in it, brought up as such, he would not, you see, even send out its master's carriage, without that master's sanction. In little things as in great, Lionel Verner could only be a thorough gentleman; to be otherwise he must have changed his nature.

"Wigham, will you take the close carriage to Deerham Court? It is wanted for Miss Verner."

"Very well, sir." But Wigham—who had been coachman in the family nearly as many years as Lionel had been in the world—wondered much, for all his prompt reply. He scarcely ever remembered a Verner's Pride carriage to have been ordered for Miss Verner.

Lionel passed into the high-road from Verner's pride, and, turning to the left, commenced his walk to Deerham. There were no roadside houses for a little way, but they soon began, by ones, by twos, until at last they grew into a street. These houses were chiefly very poor; small shops, beer-houses, labourers' cottages: but a turning to the right in the midst of the village led to a part where the houses were of a superior order, several gentlemen living there. It was a new road, called Belvedere Road; the first house in it being inhabited by Dr. West.

Lionel cast a glance across at that house as he passed down the long street. His glance was not rewarded. Very frequently pretty Sibylla would be at the windows, or her vain sister Amilly. Though, if vanity is to be brought in, I don't know where it would be found in so great a degree as in Sibylla West. The windows appeared to be untenanted; and Lionel withdrew his eyes and passed on his way. On his left hand was situated the shop of Mrs. Duff: its prints, its silk neckerchiefs, and its ribbons displayed in three parts of its bow-window. The fourth part was devoted to more miscellaneous articles, huddled indiscriminately into a corner. Nothing came amiss to Mrs. Duff: she patronized everything she thought she could turn a penny by.

"Your servant, sir," said she, dropping a curtsey as Lionel came up: for Mrs. Duff was standing at the door.

He merely nodded to her, and went on. Whether it was the sight of the woman or of some lavender prints in her window, certain it was, that the image of poor Rachel Frost came vividly into the mind of Lionel. Nothing had been heard, nothing found, to clear up the mystery of that past night.

CHAPTER X.

LADY VERNER.

At the extremity of the village, lying a little back from it, was a moderate-sized, red-brick house, standing in the midst of lands, and called Deerham Court. It had once been an extensive farm; but the present tenant, Lionel's mother, rented the house only, very little of the land. The land was let to a neighbouring farmer. Nearly a mile beyond—you could see its towers and its chimneys

from this—rose the stately old mansion Deerham Hall. Deerham Hall, Deerham Court, and a great deal of the land and property on that side the village, belonged to Sir Rufus Hautley, a proud, unsociable man. He lived at the Hall: and his only son, between whom and himself it was conjectured some estrangement existed, had got a commission in an Indian regiment, and was now serving with it.

Lionel Verner passed the village, branched off to the right, and entered the great iron gates which enclosed the courtyard of Deerham Court. A very unpretending entrance admitted him into a spacious hall; the hall being the largest and best part of the house. Those great iron gates and the hall would have done honour to a large mansion; and they gave an appearance of pretension to Deerham Court which it did not deserve.

Lionel opened a door on the left, and entered a small ante-room. This led him into the only really good room the house contained. It was elegantly furnished and fitted up, and its two large windows looked towards the open country, and to Deerham Hall. Seated by the fire, in a rich violet dress, a costly white lace cap shading her delicate face, that must once have been so beautiful—indeed, that was beautiful still—was a lady of middle age. Her seat was low: one of those chairs that we are pleased to call, commonly and irreverently, a prie-dieu. Its back was carved in arabesque foliage, and its seat was of rich violet velvet. On a small inlaid table, whose carvings were as beautiful, and its surface inlaid with mosaic-work, lay a dainty handkerchief of lace, a bottle of smelling-salts, and a book with its face downwards, all close to the lady's elbow. She was sitting in idleness just then: she always did sit in idleness: her face bent to the fire, her small hands, cased in white gloves, lying motionless on her lap—ay, a beautiful face once, though it had grown habitually peevish and discontented now. She turned her head when the door opened, and a flush rose to her cheeks when she saw Lionel.

He went up and kissed her. He loved her much. She loved him, too, better than she loved anything in life; and she drew a chair close to her, and he sat down, bending towards her. There was not much likeness between them, the mother and the son; both were very good-looking, but not alike.

"You see, mother mine, I am not late, as you prophesied I should be," said he, with one of his sweetest smiles.

"You would have been, Lionel, but for my warning. I'm sure I wish—I *wish* she was not coming! She must remember the old days in India, and will contrast the difference."

"She will scarcely remember India, when you were there. She is only a child yet, is she?"

"You know nothing about it, Lionel," was the querulous answer.

"Whether she remembers or not, will she expect to see *me* in such a house, such a position as this? It is at these seasons, when people are coming, who know what I have been formerly and ought to be now, that I feel all the humiliation of my poverty. Lucy Tempest is nineteen."

Lionel Verner knew that it was of no use to argue with his mother, when she began upon that most unsatisfactory topic, her position; which included what she called her "poverty" and her "wrongs." Though in truth not a day passed but she alluded to it.

"Lionel," she suddenly said.

He had been glancing over the pages of the book—a new work on India. He laid it down as he had found it, and turned to her.

"What shall you allow me when you come into Verner's Pride?"

"Whatever you shall wish, mother. You shall name the sum, not I. And if you name too modest a one," he added, laughing, "I shall double it. But Verner's Pride must be your home then, as well as mine."

"Never!" was the emphatic answer. "What! to be turned out of it again by the advent of a young wife? No, never, Lionel."

Lionel laughed: constrainedly this time.

"I may not be bringing home a young wife for this many and many a year to come."

"If you never brought one, I would not make my home at Verner's Pride," she resumed, in the same impulsive tones. "Live in the house by favour, that ought to have been mine by right? You would not be my true son, to ask it of me, Lionel. Catherine, is that you?" she called out, as the movements of some one were heard in the ante-room.

A woman-servant appeared.

"My lady?"

"Tell Miss Verner that Mr. Lionel is here."

"Miss Verner knows it, my lady," was the woman's reply. "She bade me ask you, sir," addressing Lionel, "if you'd please step out to her."

"Is she getting ready, Catherine?" asked Lady Verner.

"I think not, my lady."

"Go to her, Lionel, and ask her if she knows the time. A pretty thing if you arrive at the station after the train is in!"

Lionel quitted the room. Outside in the hall stood Catherine, waiting for him.

"Miss Verner has met with a little accident and hurt her foot, sir," she whispered. "She can't walk."

"Not walk!" exclaimed Lionel. "Where is she?"

"She is in the store-room, sir; where it happened."

Lionel went to the store-room, a small boarded room at the back

of the hall. A young lady sat there; a very pretty white foot in a wash-hand basin of warm water, and a shoe and stocking lying as if hastily thrown off.

"Why, Decima! what is this?"

She lifted her face. A face whose features were of the highest order of beauty, regular as if chiselled in marble, and little less colourless. But for the large, earnest, dark-blue eyes, so full of expression, it might have been accused of coldness. In sleep, or in perfect repose, when the eyelids were bent, it looked strangely cold and pure. Her dark hair was braided; and she wore a dress something the same in colour as Lady Verner's.

"Lionel, what shall I do? And to-day of all days! I shall be obliged to tell mamma: I cannot walk a step."

"What is the injury? How did you meet with it?"

"I mounted a chair. I was looking for some old Indian ornaments that I know are in that high cupboard, wishing to put them into Miss Tempest's room, and somehow the chair tilted with me, and I fell upon my foot. It is only a sprain: but I cannot walk."

"How do you know it is only a sprain, Decima? I shall send West to you."

"Thank you all the same, Lionel, but if you please, I don't like Dr. West well enough to have him," was Miss Verner's answer. "See! I don't think I can walk."

She removed her foot from the basin, and made the attempt. But for Lionel she would have fallen: and her naturally pale face became paler from pain.

"And you say you will not have Dr. West!" he cried, gently putting her into the chair again. "You must allow me to decide for you, Decima."

"Then, Lionel, I will have Jan—if I must have any one. I have more faith in him," she added, lifting her large blue eyes, "than in Dr. West."

"Let it be Jan, then, Decima. Send one of the servants for him at once. What is to be done about Miss Tempest?"

"You must go alone. Unless you can persuade mamma to go with you. Lionel, you will tell mamma about this. She must be told."

As Lionel crossed the hall on his return, the door was being opened: the Verner's Pride carriage had just driven up. Lady Verner had seen it from the window of the ante-room, and her eyes spoke her displeasure.

"Lionel, what brings *that* here?"

"I told them to bring it for Decima. I thought you would prefer that Miss Tempest should be met with that, than with a hired carriage."

"Miss Tempest will know soon enough that I am too poor to keep a carriage," said Lady Verner. "Decima may use it if she pleases. I would not."

"My dear mother, Decima will not be able to use it. She cannot go to the station. She has hurt her foot."

"How did she do that!"

"She was on a chair in the store-room, looking into the cupboard. And the——"

"Of course! that's just like Decima!" crossly responded Lady Verner. "She is at something or other everlastingly: doing half the work of a servant about the house."

Lionel made no reply. He knew that, but for Decima the house would be less comfortable than it was for Lady Verner; and that, what Decima did, she did from love.

"Will you go to the station?" he inquired.

"I! In this cold wind! How can you ask me, Lionel? I should get my face irretrievably chapped. If Decima cannot go, you must go alone."

"But how shall I know Miss Tempest?"

"You must find her out," said Lady Verner. "Her mother was a giantess: perhaps she is the same. Is Decima much hurt?"

"She thinks it is only a sprain. We have sent for Jan."

"For Jan! Much good he will do!" returned Lady Verner, in so contemptuous a tone as to prove that she had no very exalted opinion of Mr. "Jan's" abilities.

Lionel went out to the carriage, and stepped in. The footman did not shut the door. "And Miss Verner, sir?"

"Miss Verner is not coming. The railway station. Tell Wigham to drive fast, or I shall be late."

"My lady wouldn't let Miss Decima use the carriage," thought Wigham, as he drove on.

CHAPTER XI.

LUCY TEMPEST.

THE words of my lady, "her mother was a giantess," unconsciously influenced Lionel Verner's imagination. The train was steaming into the station at one end as his carriage stopped at the other. Lionel leaped from it, and mixed with the bustle of the platform.

Not very much bustle, either. And it would have been less, but that Deerham Station was the nearest approach, as yet, by rail, to Heartbury, a town of some note about four miles distant. Not a single tall lady got out of the train. Not any lady at all that Lionel

could see. There were two fat women, tearing about after their luggage, both habited in men's drab great-coats, or what looked like them; and there was one very young lady, who stood back in apparent perplexity, gazing at the scene of confusion around her.

"*She* cannot be Miss Tempest," deliberated Lionel. "If she is, my mother must have mistaken her age: she looks a child. No harm in asking her, at any rate."

He went up to the young lady. A very pleasant-looking girl, fair, with a peach-bloom upon her cheeks, dark brown hair, and eyes soft and brown and luminous. Those eyes were wandering to all parts of the platform, some anxiety in their expression.

Lionel raised his hat.

"I beg your pardon. Have I the honour of addressing Miss Tempest?"

"Oh yes, that is my name," she answered, looking up at him, the bloom deepening to a glow of satisfaction, and the soft eyes lighting up with a glad smile. "Have you come to meet me?"

"I have. I come from my mother, Lady Verner."

"I am so glad," she rejoined with a frank sincerity of manner that was perfectly refreshing in these modern days of artificial young-ladyism. "I was beginning to think no one had come: and then what could I have done?"

"My sister would have come with me to receive you, but for an accident which occurred to her just before it was time to start. Have you any luggage?"

"There's the great box I brought from India, and a hair-trunk, and my school-box. It is all in the van."

"Allow me to take you out of this crowd, and it shall be seen to," said Lionel, bending to offer his arm.

She took it, and turned with him. But stopped ere more than a step or two had been taken.

"We are going wrong. The luggage is up that way."

"I am taking you to the carriage. The luggage will be all right."

He was placing her in it, when she suddenly drew back and surveyed it.

"What a pretty carriage!" she exclaimed.

Many said the same of the Verner's Pride equipages. The colour of the panels was ultramarine, with white linings and hammer-cloths, while a good deal of silver shone on the harness of the horses. The servants' livery was white and silver, their small-clothes blue.

Lionel handed her in.

"Have we far to go?" she asked.

"Not five minutes' drive."

He closed the door, gave the footman directions about the

luggage, took his own seat by the coachman, and the carriage started. Lady Verner came to the door of the Court to receive Miss Tempest.

In the old Indian days of Lady Verner, she and Sir Lionel had been close and intimate friends with Colonel and Mrs. Tempest. Subsequently Mrs. Tempest had died, and their only daughter had been sent to a clergyman's family in England to be educated—a very superior place, where six pupils only were taken. But she was of an age to leave it now, and Colonel Tempest, who contemplated soon being home, had craved of Lady Verner to receive her in the interim.

"Lionel," said his mother to him, "you must remain here for the rest of the day, and help me to entertain her."

"Why, what can I do towards it?" responded Lionel.

"You can do something. You can talk. They have got Decima into her room, and I must be up and down with her. I don't like leaving Lucy alone the first day she is in the house—she would take a prejudice against it. One good thing, she seems quite simple; not exacting."

"Anything but exacting, I should say," replied Lionel. "I will stay for an hour or two, if you like, mother, but I must be home to dinner."

Lady Verner need not have troubled herself about "entertaining" Lucy Tempest. She was accustomed to entertain herself: and as to any ceremony or homage being paid to her, she would not have understood it, and might have felt embarrassed had it been tendered. She had not been used to anything of the sort. Could Lady Verner have seen her then, at the very moment she was talking to Lionel, her fears might have been relieved. Lucy Tempest had found her way to Decima's room, and had taken up her position in a very undignified fashion at that young lady's feet, her soft, candid brown eyes fixed upwards on Decima's face, and her tongue busy with its reminiscences of India. After some time spent in this manner, she was frightened away by the entrance of a gentleman whom Decima called "Jan." Upon which she proceeded to the chamber she had been shown to as hers, to dress; a process which did not appear to be very elaborate by the time it took. Then she went downstairs to find Lady Verner.

Lady Verner had not quitted Lionel. She had been grumbling and complaining all that time: it was half the pastime of Lady Verner's life to grumble in the ears of Lionel and Decima. Bitterly mortified had Lady Verner been when she found, upon arriving from India, that Stephen Verner, her late husband's younger brother, had succeeded to Verner's Pride, to the exclusion of herself and of Lionel; and bitterly mortified she remained. Whether it

had been by some strange oversight on the part of old Mr. Verner, or whether it had been intentional, no provision whatever had been left by him to Lady Verner and to her children. Stephen Verner would have remedied this. On the arrival of Lady Verner, he had proposed to pay over to her yearly a certain sum out of the estate: but Lady Verner, smarting under disappointment, under the sense of injustice, had flung his proposal back upon him. Never, so long as he lived, she told Stephen Verner passionately, would she be obliged to him for the worth of a sixpence in money or in kind. And she had kept her word.

Her income was very limited. It was very little besides her allowance as a colonel's widow: and to Lady Verner it seemed less than it really was, for her habits were somewhat expensive. She took this house, Deerham Court, then to be let without the land; had it embellished inside and out—which cost her more than she could afford—and had since resided in it. She would not have rented under Mr. Verner had he paid her to do it. She declined all intercourse with Verner's Pride; had never crossed its threshold; Decima went once in a way: but she, never. If she and Stephen Verner met abroad, she was coldly civil to him: she was indifferently haughty to Mrs. Verner, whom she despised in her heart for not being a lady. With all her deficiencies, Lady Verner was essentially a gentlewoman: not to be one, amounted in her eyes to little less than a sin. No wonder that she, with her delicate beauty, her quiet refinements of dress, shrank within herself as she swept past poor Mrs. Verner, with her great person, her crimson face, and her flaunting colours! No wonder that Lady Verner, smarting under her wrongs, passed half her time giving utterance to them; or that her smooth face was acquiring premature wrinkles of discontent. Lionel had a somewhat difficult course to steer, between Verner's Pride and Deerham Court, so as to keep friends with both.

Lucy Tempest appeared at the door. She stood there hesitating, after the manner of a timid schoolgirl. They turned round and saw her.

"May I come in?"

Lady Verner could have sighed over the deficiency of "style," or confidence: whichever you may like to term it. Lionel laughed, as he crossed the room to throw the door wider by way of welcome.

She wore a light dress of peculiar material, a sort of cashmere, very fine and soft. Looking at it one way it was pink; the other, mauve: its general effect was beautiful. Lady Verner could have sighed again: if the wearer was deficient in style, certainly the dress was also. A low body and short sleeves, perfectly simple, a narrow bit of white lace alone edging them: nothing on her neck,

nothing on her arms, no gloves. A child of seven might have been so dressed. Lady Verner looked at her, her brow knit, and various thoughts were running through her brain; she began to fear that Miss Tempest would require so much training as to give her trouble.

Lucy saw the look, and thought that her attire was wrong. "Ought I to have put on my best things—my new silk?" she asked.

My new silk! My best things! Lady Verner was almost at a loss for an answer. "You have not an extensive wardrobe, possibly, my dear?"

"Not very," replied Lucy. "This was my best dress, until I had my new silk. Mrs. Cust told me to put this one on for dinner to-day, and she said if Lady—if you and Miss Verner dressed very much, I could change it for the silk to-morrow. It is a *beautiful* dress," Lucy added, looking ingenuously at Lady Verner, "a pearl grey. Then I have my morning dresses, and my white for dancing. Mrs. Cust said that anything you found deficient in my wardrobe it would be better for you to supply, than for her, as you would be the better judge of what I should require."

"Mrs. Cust does not pay much attention to dress, probably," observed Lady Verner, coldly. "She is a clergyman's wife. It is sad taste when people neglect themselves, whatever may be the duties of their station."

"But Mrs. Cust does not neglect herself," spoke up Lucy, a surprised look upon her face. "She is always well dressed: not finely, you know. Mrs. Cust says that the lower classes have become so fine nowadays, that nearly the only way you may know a lady, until she speaks, is by her quiet simplicity."

"My dear, Mrs. Cust should say elegant simplicity," corrected Lady Verner. "She ought to know. She is of good family."

Lucy humbly acquiesced. She feared she herself must be too "quiet" to satisfy Lady Verner. "Will you be so kind, then, as to get me what you please?" she asked.

"My daughter will see to all these things, Lucy," replied Lady Verner. "She is not young, like you, and she is remarkably steady and experienced."

"She does not look old," said Lucy, in her candour. "She is very pretty."

"She is turned five-and-twenty. Have you seen her?"

"I have been with her ever so long. We were talking about India. She remembers my dear mamma; and, do you know"—her bright expression fading to sadness—"*I* can scarcely remember her! I should have stayed with Decima—May I call her Decima?" broke off Lucy, hesitating, as if she had done wrong.

"Certainly you may."

"I should have stayed with Decima until now, talking about mamma, but a gentleman came in."

"A gentleman?" echoed Lady Verner.

"Yes. Some one tall and very thin. Decima called him Jan. After that, I went to my room again. I could not find it at first," she added, with a pleasant little laugh. "I looked into two; but neither was mine, for I could not see the boxes. Then I changed my dress, and came down."

"I hope you had my maid to assist you," quickly remarked Lady Verner.

"Some one assisted me. When I had my dress on, ready to be fastened, I looked out to see if I could find any one to do it. A servant was at the end of the corridor, by the window, and came to me."

"But, my dear Miss Tempest, you should have rung," exclaimed Lady Verner, half petrified at the young lady's unformed manners, and privately speculating upon the sins Mrs. Cust must have to answer for. "Was it Thérèse?"

"I don't know," replied Lucy. "She was rather old, and carried a broom in her hand."

"Old Catherine, I declare! Sweeping and dusting as usual! She might have soiled your dress."

"She wiped her hands on her apron," said Lucy, simply. "She had a nice face: I liked it."

"I *beg*, my dear, that in future you will ring for Thérèse," emphatically returned Lady Verner, in her discomposure. "She understands that she is to wait upon you. Thérèse is my maid, and her time is not half occupied. Decima exacts very little of her. But take care that you do not allow her to lapse into English when with you. It is what she is apt to do unless checked. You speak French of course?" added Lady Verner, the thought crossing her that Mrs. Cust's educational training might have been as deficient on that point, as she deemed it had been on that of "style."

"I speak it quite well," replied Lucy; "as well, or nearly as well, as a French girl. But I do not require any one to wait on me," she continued. "There is never anything to do for me, but just to fasten these evening dresses that close behind. I am much obliged to you, all the same, for thinking of it, Lady Verner."

Lady Verner turned from the subject: it seemed to grow more and more unprofitable. "I shall go and hear what Jan says, if he is there," she remarked to Lionel.

"I wonder we did not see or hear him come in," was Lionel's answer.

"As if Jan could come into the house like a gentleman!" returned Lady Verner, with intense acidity. "The back-way is a step or two nearer, and therefore he patronizes it."

She left the room as she spoke, and Lionel turned to Miss Tempest. He had been exceedingly amused and edified at the conversation between her and his mother, but while Lady Verner had been inclined to groan over it, he had rejoiced. That Lucy Tempest was thoroughly and genuinely unsophisticated; that she was of a nature too sincere and honest for her manners to be otherwise than simple, he was certain. A delightful child, he thought; one he could have taken to his heart and loved as a sister. Not with any other love; *that* was already given elsewhere by Lionel Verner.

The winter evening was drawing on, and little light was in the room, except that cast by the blaze of the fire. It flickered upon Lucy's face, as she stood near it. Lionel drew a chair towards her.

"Will you not sit down, Miss Tempest?"

A formidable-looking chair, large and stately. As Lucy turned to look at it, her eyes fell upon the low one which, earlier in the afternoon, had been occupied by Lady Verner. "May I sit in this one instead? I like it best."

"You 'may' sit in any chair that the room contains, or on an ottoman, or anywhere that you like," answered Lionel, considerably amused. "Perhaps you would prefer this?"

"This" was a very low seat indeed—in point of fact, Lady Verner's footstool. He had spoken in jest, but she waited for no second permission, drew it close to the fire, and sat down upon it. Lionel looked at her, his lips and eyes dancing.

"Possibly you would have preferred the rug?"

"Yes, I should," answered she, frankly. "It is what we did at the rectory. Between the lights, on a winter's evening, we were allowed to do what we pleased for twenty minutes, and we used to sit down on the rug before the fire and talk."

"Mrs. Cust also?" asked Lionel.

"Not Mrs. Cust: you are laughing at me. If she came in and saw us, she would say we were too old to sit there, and should be better on chairs. But we preferred the rug."

"What did you talk of?"

"Of everything, I think. About the poor; Mr. Cust's poor, you know; and the village, and our studies, and—— But I don't think I must tell you that," broke off Lucy, laughing merrily at her own thoughts.

"Yes, you may," said Lionel.

"It was about that poor old German teacher of ours. We used to play her such tricks, and it was round the fire that we planned them. But she is very good," added Lucy, becoming serious, and lifting her eyes to Lionel, as if to bespeak his sympathy for the German teacher.

"Is she?"

"She was always patient and kind. The first time Lady Verner lets me go to a shop, I mean to buy her a warm winter cloak. Hers is so thin. Do you think I could get her one for two pounds?"

"I don't know at all," smiled Lionel. "A great coat for me would cost more than two pounds."

"I have two sovereigns left of my pocket-money, besides some silver. I hope it will buy a cloak. It is Lady Verner who will have the management of my money, is it not, now that I have left Mrs. Cust's?"

"I believe so."

"I wonder how much she will allow me for myself?" continued Lucy, gazing up at Lionel with a serious expression of inquiry, as if the question was a momentous one.

"I think cloaks for old teachers ought to be extra," cried Lionel. "They should not come out of your pocket-money."

"Oh, but I like them to do so. I wish I had a home of my own!—as I shall have when papa returns to Europe. I should invite her for the holidays, and give her nice dinners, and buy her some nice clothes, and send her back with her poor old heart made happy."

"Invite whom?"

"Fräulein Müller. Her father was a gentleman of good position, and he somehow lost his inheritance. When he died she found it out—there was not a shilling for her, instead of a fortune, as she had always thought. She was over forty then, and she had to come to England and begin teaching for a living. She is fifty now, and nearly all she gets she sends to Heidelberg to her poor sick sister. I wonder how much good warm cloaks do cost?"

Lucy Tempest spoke the last sentence dreamily. She was evidently debating the question in her own mind. Her small white hand rested inertly upon her pink dress, her clear face with its delicate bloom was quiet, her eyes were bent on the fire. But that Lionel's heart was elsewhere, it might have gone out, there and then, to that young girl and her attractive simplicity.

"What a pretty child you are!" involuntarily broke from him.

Up came those eyes to him, soft and luminous, their only expression being surprise, not a shade of vanity.

"I am not a child: why do you call me one? But Mrs. Cust said you would all be taking me for a child, until you knew me."

"How old are you?" asked Lionel.

"I was eighteen last September."

"Eighteen!" involuntarily repeated Lionel.

"Yes: eighteen. We had a party on my birthday. Mr. Cust

gave me a most beautifully bound copy of Thomas à Kempis: he had had it bound on purpose. I will show it to you when my books are unpacked. You would like Mr. Cust if you knew him. He is an old man now, and he has white hair. He is twenty years older than Mrs. Cust: but he is so good!"

"How is it," almost vehemently broke forth Lionel, "that you are so different from others?"

"I don't know. Am I different?"

"So different—so different—that—that——"

"What is the matter with me?" she asked timidly, almost humbly, her delicate colour deepening to crimson.

"There is nothing the matter with you," he answered, smiling; "a good thing if there were as little the matter with every one else. Do you know that I never saw any one whom I liked so much at first sight as I like you, although you appear to me only as a child? If I call here often I shall grow to love you almost as much as I love my sister Decima."

"Is not this your home?"

"No. My home is at Verner's Pride."

CHAPTER XII.

DR. WEST'S HOME.

THE house of Dr. West was already lighted up. Gas at its front door, gas at its surgery door, gas in its rooms: no habitation in the place was ever so extensively lighted as Dr. West's. The house was enclosed with iron railings, and at the side—detached—was the surgery. A very low place, this surgery: you had to go down a step or two, and then plunge into a low door. In the time of the last tenant it had been used as a garden tool-house. It was a tolerably large room, and had a tolerably small window in front; the door being on the side, opposite the side-entrance to the house. A counter ran along the room at the back, and a table, covered with miscellaneous articles, stood on the right. Shelves were ranged completely round the room, and a pair of steps, used for getting down the jars and bottles, rested in a corner. There was another room behind it, used exclusively by Dr. West.

Seated on the counter, pounding desperately away at something in a mortar, as if his life depended on it, was a peculiar-looking gentleman in shirt-sleeves. Very tall, very thin, with legs and arms that bore the appearance of being too long even for his tall body, great hands and feet, a thin face dark and red, a thin aquiline nose, black hair, and black prominent eyes that seemed to be always

staring,—there sat he, his legs dangling and his fingers working. A straightforward, honest, simple fellow looked he, all utility and very practical. One, plain in all ways.

It was Janus Verner: never, in the memory of any one, called anything but "Jan:" second and youngest son of Lady Verner, brother to Lionel. *He* brother to courtly Lionel, to stately Decima, son to refined Lady Verner? He certainly was: though Lady Verner in her cross moods would declare that Jan must have been changed at nurse—an assertion without foundation, since he had been nursed at home under her own eye. Never in his life had he been called anything but Jan: address him as Janus, or as Mr. Verner, and it may be questioned if Jan would have answered to it. People called him "droll," and, if to be of plain, unvarnished manners and speech was droll, Jan decidedly was so. Some said Jan was a fool, some said he was a bear. Lady Verner did not accord him any great amount of favour herself. She had tried to make Jan what she called a gentleman, to beat into him suavity, gracefulness, tact, gloss of speech and bearing; something between a Lord Chesterfield and a Sir Roger de Coverley, and she had been obliged to give it up as a hopeless task. Jan was utterly irreclaimable: Nature had made him plain and straightforward, and so he remained. But there was many a one that the world would bow down to as a model, whose intrinsic worth was very small compared with unoffending Jan's. Lady Verner would tell Jan he was undutiful. Jan tried to be as dutiful to her as he could be; but he *could not* change his ungainly person, his awkward manner. As well try to wash a negro white.

Lady Verner had proposed that Jan should go into the army. Jan (plain spoken as a boy, as he was still) had responded that he'd rather not go out to be shot at. What *was* she to do with him, Lady Verner peevishly asked. She had no money, she lamented, and she would take care Jan was not helped by Mr. Verner. To make him a barrister, or a clergyman, or a member of parliament (it was what Lady Verner said), would cost great sums of money: a commission could be obtained for him gratis, in consideration of his father's services.

"Make me an apothecary," said Jan.

"An apothecary!" echoed Lady Verner, aghast. "That's not a gentleman's calling."

Jan opened his great eyes. Had he taken a liking for carpentering, he would have deemed it gentlemanly enough for him.

"What has put an apothecary's business into your head?" cried Lady Verner.

"I should like the pounding," replied Jan.

"The pounding!" reiterated Lady Verner, in astonishment.

"I should like it altogether," concluded Jan. "I wish you'd let me go apprentice to Dr. West."

Jan held to his liking. In due course of time he was apprenticed to Dr. West, and pounded away to his heart's content. Thence he went to London to walk the hospitals, afterwards completing his studies in Paris. It was at the latter period that the accident happened to Jan which summoned Lionel to Paris. Jan was knocked down by a carriage in the street, his leg broken, and he was otherwise injured. Time and skill cured him. Time and perseverance completed his studies, and Jan became a licensed surgeon of no slight skill. He returned to Deerham, and was engaged as assistant to Dr. West. No very ambitious position, but "it's good enough for Jan," slightingly said Lady Verner. Jan probably thought the same, or he would have sought a better. He was four-and-twenty now. Dr. West was a general practitioner, holding an Edinburgh degree only. There was plenty to do in Deerham and its neighbourhood, what with the rich and what with the poor. Dr. West chiefly attended the rich himself, and left Jan to take care of the poor. It was all one to Jan.

Jan sat on the counter in the surgery, pounding away. He had just come in from his visit to Deerham Court, summoned thither by the slight accident to his sister Decima. Leaning his elbows on the counter, and his pale puffy cheeks on his hands, intently watching Jan with his light eyes, was a young gentleman rising fifteen, with an apron tied round his waist. This was Master Cheese; an apprentice, as Jan once had been. In point of fact, the pounding now was Master Cheese's work, but he was fat and lazy, and so sure as Jan came into the surgery, so sure would young Cheese begin to grunt and groan, and vow that his arms were "knocked off" with the work. Jan, in his indolent manner,—and in motion and manner Jan appeared intensely indolent, as if there was no hurry in him he would bring his words, too, out indolently,—would lift the pounding machine aloft, sit himself down on the counter, and complete the work.

"I say," said young Cheese, watching the progress of the pestle with satisfaction, "Dame Dawson has been here."

"What did she want?" asked Jan.

"Bad in her inside, she says. I gave her three good doses of jalap."

"Jalap!" echoed Jan. "Well, it won't do her much harm. She won't take 'em; she'll throw 'em away."

"Law, Jan!" For, in the privacy of the surgery, young Cheese was thus accustomed unceremoniously to address his master—as Jan was. And Jan allowed it with composure.

"She'll throw 'em away," repeated Jan. "There's not a worse

lot for physic in all the parish than Dame Dawson. I know her of old. She thought she'd get peppermint and cordials ordered for her: an excuse for running up a score at the public-house. Where's the doctor?"

"He's off somewhere. I saw one of the Bitterworth grooms come to the house this afternoon, so perhaps something's wrong there. I say, Jan, there'll be a stunning pie for supper!"

"Have you seen it?"

"Haven't I! I went into the kitchen when she was making it. It has a hare inside it, and forcemeat balls."

"Who?" asked Jan—alluding to the maker.

"Miss Deb," replied young Cheese. "It's sure to be something extra good, for her to go and make it. If she don't help me to a rare good serving, shan't I look black at her!

"It mayn't be for supper," debated Jan.

"Cook said it was. I asked her. She thought somebody was coming. I say, Jan, if you miss any of the castor oil, don't go and say I drank it."

Jan lifted his eyes to a shelf opposite, where various glass bottles stood. Among them was the one containing castor oil. "Who has been at it?"

"Miss Amilly. She came and filled that great fat glass pot of hers, with her own hands; and she made me drop in some essence of cloves to scent it. Won't her hair smell of it to-night!"

"They'll make castor oil scarce, if they go at it like that," said Jan, indifferently.

"They use about a quart a month; I know they do; the three together," exclaimed young Cheese, as vehemently as if the loss of the castor oil was personal.

"Sibylla doesn't use it," said Jan.

"Doesn't she, though!" retorted young Cheese. "She uses many things on the sly that she pretends not to use. She's as vain as a peacock. Did you hear about——"

Master Cheese cut short his question. Coming in at the surgery door was Lionel Verner.

"Well, Jan! What about Decima? After waiting ages at the Court for you to come downstairs and report, I found you were gone."

"It's only a twist," said Jan. "It will be all right in a few days. How's Uncle Stephen to-day?"

"Just the same. Are the young ladies in?"

"Go and see," said Jan. "I know nothing about 'em."

"Yes, they are in, sir," interrupted young Cheese. "They have not been out all the afternoon, for a wonder."

Lionel left the surgery, stepped round to the front door, and entered the house.

In a square, moderately-sized drawing-room, with tasty things scattered about it to catch the eye, stood a young lady, figuring off before the chimney-glass. Had you looked critically into the substantial furniture you might have found it old and poor: of a different class from the furniture at Verner's Pride, widely different from the light, elegant furniture at Lady Verner's. But, what with white anti-macassars, many coloured mats on which reposed pretty ornaments, glasses and vases of flowers, and other trifles, the room looked well enough for anything. In like manner, had you, with the same critical eye, scanned the young lady, you would have found that of real beauty she possessed little. A small, pretty doll's face, with blue eyes and gold-coloured ringlets; a round face, betraying nothing very great, or good, or intellectual; only something fascinating. Her chief beauty lay in her complexion; by candle-light it was radiant and lovely, a pure red and white, looking like wax-work. A pretty, graceful girl she looked; and, what with her fascinations of person, of dress, and of manner, all of which she perfectly well knew how to display, she had contrived to lead more than one heart captive and to hold it fast in chains.

The light of the chandelier shone on her now; on her blue gauzy dress, set off with ribbons, on her sleepy blue eyes, her rose-coloured cheeks. She was before the glass, twisting her ringlets round her fingers, and putting them in various positions to try their effect: her employment, her look, her manner, all indicating the very essence of vanity. The opening of the door caused her to turn her head, and she shook her ringlets into their place, and dropped her hands by her side, at the entrance of Lionel Verner.

"Oh, Lionel! is it you?" said she, with as much composure as if she had not been caught gazing at herself. "I was looking at this," pointing to an inverted tumbler on the mantel-piece. "Is it not strange that we should see a moth at this cold season? Amilly found it this afternoon on the geraniums."

Lionel Verner advanced and bent his head to look at the pretty speckled moth reposing so still on its green leaf Did he see through the artifice? Did he suspect that the young lady had been admiring her own pretty face, and not the moth? Not he. Lionel's whole heart had long ago been given to that vain butterfly, Sibylla West, who was gay and fluttering, and really of little more use in life than the moth. How was it that he had suffered himself to love *her?* Suffered! Love plays strange tricks, and it has fooled many a man as it was fooling Lionel Verner.

And what of Sibylla? Sibylla did not love him. The two ruling passions of her heart were vanity and ambition. To be sometime mistress of Verner's Pride was as a very vista of paradise, and therefore she encouraged Lionel. She did not encourage him very much;

she was rather in the habit of playing fast and loose with him; but that only served to rivet more tightly the links of his chain. All the love—such as it was!—that Sibylla West was capable of giving was in the possession of Frederick Massingbird. Strange tricks again! It was scarcely credible that one should fall in love with *him* by the side of attractive Lionel; but so it had been. Sibylla loved Frederick Massingbird for himself, she liked Lionel because he was heir to Verner's Pride, and she had managed to keep both of them her slaves.

Lionel had never spoken of his love. He knew that his marriage with Sibylla West would be so utterly distasteful to Mr. Verner, that he was content to wait. He knew that Sibylla could not mistake him—could not mistake what his feelings were; and he believed that she also was content to wait until he should be his own master and at liberty to ask for her. When that time should come, what did she intend to do with Frederick Massingbird, who made no secret *to her* that he loved her and expected to make her his wife? Sibylla did not know; she did not much care; she was of a careless nature, and allowed the future to take its chance.

The only person who had penetrated to the secret of her love for Frederick Massingbird was her father, Dr. West.

"Don't be a simpleton, child, and bind yourself with your eyes bandaged," he abruptly and laconically said to her one day. "When Verner's Pride falls in, then marry whoever is its master."

"Lionel will certainly be its master, will he not?" she answered, startled out of the words.

"We don't know who will be its master," was Dr. West's rejoinder. "Don't play the simpleton, I say, Sibylla, by entangling yourself with your cousin Fred."

Dr. West was one who possessed an eye to the main chance; and, had Lionel Verner been, beyond contingency, "certain" of Verner's Pride, there is little doubt but he would have brought him to book at once, by demanding his intentions with regard to Sibylla. There were very few persons in Deerham who did not deem Lionel as certain of Verner's Pride as though he were already in possession of it. Dr. West was probably an unusually cautious man.

"It is singular," observed Lionel, looking at the moth. "The day has been sunny, but far too cold to call these moths into life. At least, I think so; but I am not learned in entomology."

"Ento——, what a hard word!" cried Sibylla, in her pretty affected manner. "I should never know how to spell it."

Lionel smiled, his deep love shining out of his eyes as he looked down upon her. He loved her powerfully, deeply, passionately; to him she was as a very angel, and he believed her to be pure-souled, honest-hearted, single-minded.

"Where did my aunt go to-day?" inquired Sibylla, alluding to Mrs. Verner.

"She did not go anywhere that I am aware of," he answered.

"I saw the carriage out this afternoon."

"It was going to the station for Miss Tempest."

"Oh! she's come, then. Have you seen her? What sort of a demoiselle does she seem?"

"The sweetest child in the world!—she looks little more than a child!" cried Lionel, impulsively.

"A child, is she? I had an idea she was grown up. Have any of you at Verner's Pride heard from John?"

"No."

"But the mail's in, is it not? How strange that he does not write!"

"He may be coming home with his gold," said Lionel.

They were interrupted. First of all came in the tea-things—for at Dr. West's the dinner-hour was early—and, next, two young ladies, bearing a great resemblance to each other. It would give them dire offence not to call them young. They were really not very much past thirty, but they were of that class of women who age rapidly; their hair was thin, some of their teeth were gone, and they had thin flushed faces and large twisted noses; but their blue eyes had a good-natured look in them. Little in person, rather bending forward as they walked, and dressing youthfully, they yet looked older than they really were. Their light brown hair was worn in short straggling ringlets in front, and twisted up with a comb behind. Once upon a time that hair was long and tolerably thick, but it had gradually and spitefully worn down to what it was now. The Miss Wests were proud of it still, however; as may be inferred by the disappearance of the castor oil. A short time back, some one had recommended it to them as the best specific for bringing on departed hair. They were inoffensive in mind and manners, rather simple, somewhat affected and very vain, quarrelling with no one under the sun, except Sibylla. Sibylla was the plague of their lives. So many years younger than they, they had petted and indulged her as a child, until at length the child became their mistress. Sibylla was rude and ungrateful, would throw scornful words at them and call them "old maids," with other reproachful terms. There was open warfare between them: but in their hearts they loved Sibylla still. They had been named respectively Deborah and Amilly. The latter had been intended for Amélie; but by some mistake of the parents or the clergyman, none of them French scholars, Amilly the child was christened and registered. It remained a joke against Amilly to this day.

"Sibylla!" exclaimed Deborah, somewhat in surprise, as she

shook hands with Lionel, "I thought you had gone to Verner's Pride."

"No one came for me. It grew dusk, and I did not care to go alone," replied Sibylla.

"Did you think of going to Verner's Pride this evening, Sibylla?" asked Lionel. "Let me take you now. We shall be just in time for dinner. I'll bring you back this evening."

"I don't know," hesitated Sibylla. The truth was, she had expected Frederick Massingbird to come for her. "I—think—I'll go," she slowly said, apparently balancing some point in her mind.

"If you do go, you should make haste and put your things on," suggested Miss Amilly. And Sibylla acquiesced, and left the room.

"Has Mr. Jan been told that tea's ready, I wonder?" cried Miss Deborah.

Mr. Jan apparently had been told, for he entered as she was speaking; and Master Cheese—his apron off and his hair brushed—with him. Master Cheese cast an inquisitive look at the tea-table, hoping he should see something tempting upon it; eating good things forming the pleasantest portion of that young gentleman's life.

"Take this seat, Mr. Jan," said Miss Amilly, drawing a chair near to her own. "Master Cheese, have the kindness to move a little round: Mr. Jan can't see the fire if you sit there."

"I don't want to see it," said literal Jan. "I'm not cold." And Master Cheese took the opportunity given by the words, to remain where he was. He liked to sit in the warmth, with his back to the fire.

"I cannot think where papa is," said Miss Deborah. "Mr. Lionel, is it of any use asking you to take a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, I am going home to dinner," replied Lionel. "Dr. West is coming in now," he added, perceiving that gentleman's approach from the window.

"Miss Amilly," asked Jan, "have you been at the castor oil?"

Poor Miss Amilly turned all the colours of the rainbow: if she had one weakness, it was upon the subject of her diminishing locks. Whilst Cheese, going red also, administered Jan sundry kicks under the table, as an intimation that he should have kept counsel. "I—took—just a little drop, Mr. Jan," said she. "What's the dose, if you please? Is it one teaspoonful or two?"

"It depends upon the age," said Jan, "if you mean taken inwardly. For you it would be—— I say, Cheese, what are you kicking at?"

Cheese began to stammer something about the leg of the table; but the subject was interrupted by the entrance of Sibylla. Lionel

wished them good evening, and went out with her. Outside the room they encountered Dr. West.

"Where are you going, Sibylla?" he asked almost sharply, as his glance fell upon his daughter and Lionel.

"To Verner's Pride."

"Go and take your things off. You cannot go to Verner's Pride this evening."

"But, papa, why?" inquired Sibylla, feeling that she should like to turn restive.

"I have my reasons for it. You will know them later. Now go and take your things off without another word."

Sibylla dared not openly dispute the will of her father, neither would she attempt to do so before Lionel Verner. She turned somewhat unwillingly towards the staircase, and Dr. West opened the drawing-room door, signing to Lionel to wait.

"Deborah, I am going out. Don't keep the tea. Mr. Jan, should I be summoned anywhere, you'll attend for me. I don't know when I shall be home."

"All right," called out Jan. And Dr. West went out with Lionel Verner.

"I am going to Verner's Pride," he said, taking Lionel's arm as soon as they were in the street. "There's news from Australia. John Massingbird's dead."

The announcement was made so abruptly, with so little circumlocution or preparation, that Lionel Verner failed at the first moment to take in the full meaning of the words.—"John Massingbird dead?" he mechanically asked.

"He is dead. It's a sad tale. He had the gold about him, a great quantity of it, bringing it down to Melbourne, and he was killed on the road; murdered for the sake of the gold.

"How have you heard it?" demanded Lionel.

"I met Roy just now," replied Dr. West. "He stopped me, saying he had heard from his son by this afternoon's post; there was bad news in the letter, and he supposed he must go to Verner's Pride, and break it to them. He gave me the letter, and I undertook to carry the tidings to Mrs. Verner."

"It is awfully sudden," said Lionel. "By the mail, two months ago, he wrote himself to us, in the highest spirits. And now—dead!"

"Life, over there, is not worth a month's purchase just now," remarked Dr. West; and Lionel could but note that had he been discussing the death of a total stranger, instead of a nephew, he could only have spoken in the same indifferent, matter-of-fact tone. "By all accounts, society is in a strange state out there," he continued; "ruffians lying in wait ever for prey. The men have been taken, and the gold found upon them, Luke writes."

That's good, so far," said Lionel.

When they reached Verner's Pride, they found that a letter was waiting for Frederick Massingbird, who had not been home since he left the house early in the afternoon. The superscription was in the same handwriting as the letter Dr. West had brought—Luke Roy's. There could be no doubt that it was only a confirmation of the sad tidings.

Mrs. Verner was in the drawing-room alone, Tynn said, ready to go in to dinner, and rather cross that Mr. Lionel should keep her waiting for it.

"Who will break it to her—you or I?" asked Dr. West, of Lionel.

"I think it should be you. You are her brother."

Broken to her it was, in the best way they were able. It proved a severe shock. Mrs. Verner had loved John, her eldest born, above every earthly thing. He was wild, random, improvident, had given her incessant trouble as a child and as a man; and so, mother-fashion, she had loved him the best.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONTEMPLATED VOYAGE.

FREDERICK MASSINGBIRD sat perched on the gate of a ploughed field, softly whistling. His brain was busy, and he was holding counsel with himself, under the grey February skies. Three weeks had gone by since the tidings arrived of the death of his brother, and Frederick was deliberating whether he should, or should not, go out. His own letter from Luke Roy had been in substance the same as that which Luke had written to his father. It was neither more explanatory, nor less so. Luke Roy was not a first-hand at epistolary correspondence. John had been attacked and killed for the sake of his gold, and the men and the gold had been seized by the law; so far it said, and no farther. That the idea should occur to Frederick to go out to Melbourne, and lay claim to the gold and any other property left by John, was only natural. He had been making up his mind to do so for the last three weeks; and perhaps the vision of essaying a little business in the gold-fields on his own account, urged him on. But he had not fully made up his mind yet. The journey was long and hazardous; and—he did not care to leave Sibylla.

"To be, or not to be?" soliloquized he, from his seat on the gate, as he plucked thin branches from the bare winter hedge, and scattered them. "Old step-father's wiry yet; he may last an age, and this is getting a horrid humdrum life. I wonder what he'll

leave me, when he does go off? Mother said one day she thought it wouldn't be more than five hundred pounds. *She* doesn't know: he does not tell her about his private affairs—never has told her. Five hundred pounds! If he left me a paltry sum such as that, I'd fling it in the heir's face—Master Lionel's."

He put a piece of the thorn into his mouth, bit it, and went on with his soliloquy.

"I had better go. Why—if nothing, to speak of, does come to me from old Verner, this money of John's would be a perfect windfall. I must not lose the chance of it—and lose it I should, unless I go out and see after it. No, it would never do. I'll go. It's hard to say how much he has left, poor fellow. Thousands—if one may judge by his letters—besides this nugget that they killed him for, the villains! Yes, I'll go—that's settled. And now to try and get Sibylla. She'd accompany me fast enough. At least, I fancy she would. But there's that old West! I may have a battle over it with him."

He flung away what remained in his hand of the thorn, leaped off the gate, and bent his steps hastily in the direction of Deerham. Could he be going, there and then, to Dr. West's, to try his fate with Sibylla? Very probably. Frederick Massingbird liked to deliberate well when making up his mind to a step: but, that once done, he was wont to lose no time in carrying it out.

On this same afternoon, and just about the same hour, Lionel Verner was strolling through Deerham on his way to pay a visit to his mother. Near the door he encountered Decima—well again now—and Miss Tempest, who were going out. None would have believed Lionel and Decima to be brother and sister, judging by their attire—he wore deep mourning, she had not a shred of mourning about her. Lady Verner, in her prejudice against Verner's Pride, had neither put on mourning herself for John Massingbird, nor allowed Decima to put it on. Lionel was turning with them; but Lady Verner, who had seen him from the window, sent a servant to desire him to come to her.

"Is it anything particular, mother?" he hastily inquired. "I am going out with Decima and Lucy."

"It is so far particular, Lionel, that I wish you to stay with me, instead of going with them," answered Lady Verner. "I fancy you are getting rather fond of being with Lucy, and—and—in short, it won't do."

Lionel, in his excessive astonishment, could only stare at his mother.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Lucy Tempest! What won't do?"

"You are beginning to pay Lucy Tempest particular attention,"

said Lady Verner, unscrewing the silver stopper of her essence-bottle, and applying some to her forehead. "I will not permit it, Lionel."

Lionel could not help laughing.

"What can have put such a notion into your head, mother, I am at a loss to conceive. Certainly nothing in my conduct has induced it. I have talked to Lucy as a child, more than as anything else; I have scarcely thought of her but as one——"

"Lucy is not a child," interrupted Lady Verner.

"In years I find she is not. When I first saw her at the railway station, I thought she was a child, and the impression somehow remains upon my mind. Too often I talk to her as one. As to anything else—were I to marry to-morrow, it is not Lucy Tempest I should make my wife."

The first glad look that Lionel had seen on Lady Verner's face for many a day came over it then. In her own mind she had been weaving a pretty little romance for Lionel: and it was her dread, lest that romance should be interfered with, which had called up her fears, touching Lucy Tempest.

"My darling Lionel, you know where you might choose a wife," she said. "I have long wished that you would do it. Beauty, rank, wealth,—you may win them for the asking."

A slightly self-conscious smile crossed the lips of Lionel.

"You are surely not going to introduce again that nonsense about Mary Elmsley!" he exclaimed. "I should never like her, never marry her; therefore——"

"Did you not allude to *her* when you said just now—that it was not Lucy Tempest you should make your wife?"

"No."

"To whom, then? Lionel, I must know it."

Lionel's cheek flushed scarlet. "I am not going to marry yet—I have no intention of doing so. Why should this conversation have arisen?"

The words seemed to arouse a sudden dread on the part of Lady Verner. "Lionel," she gasped in a low tone, "there is a dreadful fear coming over me. Not Lady Mary! Some one else! I remember Decima said one day that you appeared to care more for Sibylla West than for her, your sister. I have never thought of it from that hour to this; I paid no more attention to it than though she had said you cared for my maid Thérèse. You *cannot* care for Sibylla West!"

Lionel had high notions of duty as well as of honour, and he would not equivocate to his mother. "I do care very much for Sibylla West," he said in a low tone; "and, please God, I hope she will sometime be my wife. But, mother, this confidence is entirely

between ourselves. I beg you not to speak of it: it must not be suffered to get abroad."

The one short sentence of avowal over, Lionel might as well have talked to the moon. Lady Verner heard him not. She was horrified. The Wests in her eyes were utterly despicable. Dr. West was tolerated *as* her doctor; but as nothing else. Her brave Lionel—standing there before her in all the pride of his strength and beauty—*he* sacrifice himself to Sibylla West! Of the two, Thérèse might have been the less dreadful alternative to the mind of Lady Verner.

A quarrel ensued. Stay—that is a wrong word. It was not a quarrel, for Lady Verner had all the talking, and Lionel would not respond angrily; he kept his lips pressed together lest he should. Never had Lady Verner been moved to a like scene: she reproached, she sobbed, she entreated. And, in the midst of it, in walked Decima and Lucy Tempest.

Lady Verner for once forgot herself. She forgot that Lucy was a stranger; she forgot the request of Lionel for silence; and, upon Decima's asking what was amiss, she declared all—that Lionel loved Sibylla West, and meant to marry her.

Decima was too shocked to speak. Lucy turned and looked at Lionel, a pleasant smile in her eyes. "She is very pretty; very, very pretty; I never saw any one prettier."

"Thank you, Lucy," he cordially said: and it was the first time he had called her Lucy.

Decima went up to her brother. "Lionel, *must* it be? I do not like her."

"Decima, I fear that you and my mother are both prejudiced," he somewhat haughtily answered. And there he stopped. In turning his eyes towards his mother as he spoke of her, he saw that she had fainted away.

Jan was sent for, in all haste. Dr. West was Lady Verner's medical adviser; but a feeling in Decima's heart at the moment prevented her summoning him. Jan arrived, on the run: the servant had told him she was not sure but her lady was dying.

Lady Verner had revived then; was better; and was re-entering upon the grievance which had so affected her. "What could it have been?" wondered Jan, who knew his mother was not subject to fainting-fits.

"Ask your brother, there, what it was," resentfully spoke Lady Verner. "He told me he was going to marry Sibylla West."

"Law!" uttered Jan.

Lionel stood; haughty, impassive; his lips curling, his figure drawn up to its full height. He would not reproach his mother by so much as a word, but the course she was taking, in thus pre-

claiming his affairs to the world, wounded him in no measured degree.

"I don't like her," said Jan. "Deborah and Amilly are not much, but I'd rather have the two, than Sibylla."

"Jan," said Lionel, suppressing his temper, "*your* opinion was not asked for."

Jan sat down on the arm of the sofa, his great legs dangling. "Sibylla can't marry two," said he.

"Will you be quiet, Jan?" said Lionel. "You have no right to interfere. You shall not interfere."

"Gracious, Lionel, I don't want to interfere," returned Jan, simply. "Sibylla's going to marry Fred Massingbird."

"Will you be quiet?" reiterated Lionel, his brow flushing scarlet.

"I'll be quiet," said Jan, with composure. "You can go and ask her yourself. It has all been settled this afternoon; not ten minutes ago. Fred's going out to Australia, and Sibylla's going with him, and Deborah and Amilly are crying their eyes out, at the thought of parting with her."

Lady Verner looked up at Jan, an expression of eager hope on her face. She could have kissed him a thousand times. Lionel—Lionel took his hat and walked out.

Believing it? No. The temptation to chastise Jan was growing great, and he deemed it well to remove himself from it. Jan was right, however.

Much to the surprise of Frederick Massingbird, very much to the surprise of Sibylla, Dr. West not only gave his consent to the marriage as soon as asked, but urged it on. If Fred must depart in a week, why they could be married in a week, he said. Sibylla was thunderstruck: Miss Deborah and Miss Amilly gave vent to a few hysterical shrieks, and hinted about wedding clothes and the outfit. *That* could be got together in a day, was the reply of Dr. West, and they were too much astonished to venture to say it could not.

"You told me to wait for Lionel Verner," whispered Sibylla, when she and her father were alone, as she stood trembling before him. In her mind's eye she saw Verner's Pride slipping from her: and it gave her chagrin, in spite of her love for Fred Massingbird.

Dr. West leaned forward and whispered a few words in her ear. She started violently, and coloured crimson. "Papa!"

"It is true," nodded the doctor.

As Lionel passed the house on his way from Deerham Court to Verner's Pride, he turned into it, led by a powerful impulse. He did not believe Jan, but the words had made him feel uneasy. Fred Massingbird had gone then, and the doctor was out. Lionel looked into the drawing-room, and there found the two elder Miss

Wests, each dissolved in a shower of tears. So far, Jan's words were borne out. A sharp spasm shot through his heart.

"You are in grief," he said, advancing to them. "What is the cause?"

"The most dreadful voyage for her!" ejaculated Miss Deborah. "The ship may go to the bottom before it gets there."

"And not so much as time to *think* of proper things for her, let alone getting them!" sobbed Miss Amilly. "It's all a confusion in my mind together: bonnets, and gowns, and veils, and wreaths, and trunks, and petticoats, and calico things for the voyage!"

Lionel felt his lips grow pale. They were too much engrossed to notice him; nevertheless, he covered his face with his hand as he stood by the mantel-piece. "Where is she going?" he quietly asked.

"To Melbourne, with Fred," said Miss Deborah. "Fred's going out to see about the money and gold that John left, and to realize it. They are not to stay there: it will only be the voyage out and home. But if she should be taken ill out there and die! Her sisters died, Mr. Lionel. Fred is her cousin, too. Better have married one not of kin to her."

They talked on. Lionel heard them not. After the revelation, that she was about to marry, all else seemed a chaos. But he was one who could control his feelings.

"I must be going," said he, quietly moving away. "Good day to you."

He shook hands with both, amidst a great accession of sobs, and left the room. Running down the stairs at that moment, singing gaily a scrap of a merry song, came Sibylla, unconscious of his vicinity; indeed, of his presence in the house. She started when she saw him, and stopped in hesitation.

Lionel threw open the door of the empty dining-room, caught her arm and drew her into it: his bearing haughty, his gestures imperative. There they stood before each other, neither speaking for some moments. Lionel's very lips were livid; and *her* rich wax-work colour went and came, and her clear blue eyes fell under his stern gaze.

"Is this true, which I have been obliged to hear?" was his first question.

She knew that she had acted ill. She knew that Lionel Verner deserved to have a better part played by him. She had always looked up to him—all the Wests had—as one superior in birth, rank, and station to herself. Altogether, the moment brought her a great amount of shame and confusion.

"Answer me one question: I demand it of you," reiterated Lionel. "Have you ever mistaken my sentiments towards you in the least degree?"

"Have—I—I don't know," she faltered.

"No equivocation," burst forth Lionel. "Have you not *known* that I loved you? That I was only waiting my uncle's death to make you my wife—Heaven forgive me that I should thus speak as though I had built upon it!"

Sibylla let fall a few tears.

"Which have you loved?—all this time! Me?—or him?"

"Oh! don't speak to me like that," sobbed Sibylla. "He asked me to marry him, and—and—papa said yes."

"I ask you," said Lionel, in a low voice, "which is it that you love?"

She did not answer. She stood before him the prettiest picture of distress imaginable: her hands clasped, her large blue eyes filled with tears, her golden hair shading her burning cheeks.

"If you have been surprised or terrified into this engagement, loving him not, will you give him up for me?" tenderly whispered Lionel. "Not—you understand—if your love be his. In that case, I would not ask it. But, without reference to myself at all, I doubt—and I have my reasons for it—if Frederick Massingbird be worthy of you."

Was she wavering in her own mind? She stole a glance upward—at his tall, fine form, his attractive face, its lineaments showing out in that moment all the pride of the Verners. A pride that mingled with love.

Lionel bent to her:

"Sibylla, if you love him I have no more to say; if you love me, avow it, as I will then avow my love, my intentions, in the face of day. Reflect before you speak. It is a solemn moment,—a moment which holds alike my destiny and yours in its hands."

A rush of blood to her heart; a rush of moisture to her forehead, for Sibylla West was not wholly without feeling, and she knew, as Lionel said, that it was a decision fraught with grave destiny. But Frederick Massingbird was more to her than he was.

"I have given my promise. I cannot go from it," was her scarcely breathed answer.

"May your falsity never come home to you!" broke from Lionel in the bitterness of his anguish. And he strode from the room without another word or look, and left the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING.

DEERHAM could not believe the news. Verner's Pride could not believe it. No one believed it, except Lady Verner, and she was only too thankful to believe and hug it. There was nothing surprising in Sibylla's marrying her Cousin Fred, for many had shrewdly suspected that the favour between them was not altogether cousinly favour; the surprise was given to the hasty marriage. Dr. West vouchsafed an explanation. Two of his daughters, aged respectively one year and two years younger than Amilly, had each died of consumption, as all Deerham knew. On attaining her twenty-fifth year, each had shown rapid symptoms of disease, and had lingered only a few weeks. Sibylla was only one-and-twenty yet; but Dr. West fancied he saw, or said he saw, grounds for fear. It was known of what value a sea-voyage was in these constitutions; hence his consent to the departure of Sibylla. Such was the explanation of Dr. West.

"I wonder whether the 'fear of consumption' has been called up by himself for the occasion?" was the thought that crossed the mind of Decima Verner. Decima did not believe in Dr. West.

Verner's Pride, like the rest, had been taken by surprise. Mrs. Verner received the news with equanimity. She had never given Fred a tithe of the love that John had had, and she did not seem to care much whether he married Sibylla or whether he did not,—whether he went out to Australia, or whether he stayed at home. Frederick told her of it in a very off-hand manner: but he took pains to bespeak the approbation of Mr. Verner.

"I hope my choice is pleasant to you, sir. That you will cordially sanction it."

"Whether it is pleasant to me or not, I have no right to say it shall not be," was the reply of Mr. Verner. "I have never interfered with you, or with your brother, since you became inmates of my house."

"Do you not like Sibylla, sir?"

"She is a pretty girl. I know nothing against her. I think you might have chosen worse."

Coldly, very coldly were the words delivered; and there was a strangely keen expression of anguish on Mr. Verner's face; but that was nothing unusual now. Frederick Massingbird was content to accept the words as a sanction of approval.

A few words—I don't mean angry ones—passed between him and

Lionel on the night before the wedding. Lionel had not condescended to speak to Frederick Massingbird upon the subject at all: Sibylla had refused him, for the other, of her own free will; and there he let it rest. But the evening before the marriage-day, Lionel appeared strangely troubled; undecided, anxious, as if he were debating some question with himself. Suddenly he went straight up to Frederick Massingbird's chamber, who was deep in the business of packing, as his unfortunate brother John had been, not two short years before.

"I wish to speak to you," he began. "I have thought of doing so these several days past, but have hesitated, for you may deem that it is no business of mine. However, I cannot get it out of my mind that it may be my duty; and I have come to do it."

Frederick Massingbird was half buried amid piles of things, but he turned round at this strange address and looked at Lionel.

"Is there *nothing* on your conscience that should prevent your marrying that girl?" gravely asked Lionel.

"Do you want her yourself?" was Fred's answer, after a prolonged stare.

Lionel flushed to his very temples. He controlled the hasty retort that rose to his tongue. "I came here not to speak in any one's interest but hers. Were she free as air this moment—were she to come to my feet and say, 'Let me be your wife,' I should tell her that the whole world was before her to choose from, except myself. She can never again be anything to me. No. I speak for her alone. She is marrying you in all confidence. Are you worthy of her?"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Frederick Massingbird.

"If there be any sin upon your conscience that ought to prevent your taking her, or any confiding girl, to your heart, as wife, reflect whether you should ignore it. The consequences may come home to you later; and then what would be her position?"

"I have no sin upon my conscience. Poor John, perhaps, had plenty of it. I do not understand you, Lionel Verner."

"On your sacred word?"

"On my sacred word of honour."

"Then forgive me," was the ready reply of Lionel. And he frankly held out his hand to Frederick Massingbird.

CHAPTER XV.

A TROUBLED MIND.

JUST one fortnight from the very day that witnessed the sailing of Frederick Massingbird and his wife, Mr. Verner was taken alarmingly ill. Fred, in his soliloquy that afternoon, when you saw him perched upon the field gate--"Old step-father's wiry yet, and may last an age,"---had certainly not exercised the gift of prevision, for there was no doubt that Mr. Verner's time to die had now come.

Lionel had thrown his sorrow bravely from him: in outward appearance at any rate. What it might be doing for him inwardly, he alone could tell. These apparently calm, undemonstrative natures, that show a quiet exterior to the world, may have an inward fire consuming their heartstrings. He did not go near the wedding; but neither did he shut himself up indoors, as one indulging lamentation and grief. He pursued his occupations just as usual. He read to Mr. Verner, who allowed him to do so that day; he rode out; he saw people, friends and others whom it was necessary to see. He had the magnanimity to shake hands with the bride, and wish her joy.

It occurred in this way. Mrs. Verner declined to attend the ceremony. Since the news of John's death she had been ailing both in body and mind. But she desired Frederick to take Verner's Pride in his road when driving away with his bride, that she might say her last farewell to him and Sibylla, neither of whom she might ever see again. Oh, she would see them again fast enough, was Fred's response; they should not be away more than a year. But he complied with her request, and brought Sibylla to her. About three o'clock in the afternoon, the ceremony and the breakfast over, the carriage and its four horses clattered on to the terrace, and Fred handed Sibylla out of it. Lionel was crossing the hall at the moment; his horse had just been brought round for him. To say he was surprised to see them there would not be saying enough; he had known nothing of the intended call. They met face to face. Sibylla wore a sweeping silk dress; a fine Indian shawl, the gift of Mrs. Verner, was folded round her, and her golden hair fell beneath her bonnet. Her eyes fell also before the gaze of Lionel.

Never had she looked more beautiful, more attractive; and Lionel felt it. But, had she been one for whom he had never cared, he could not have shown more courtly indifference. A moment given to choking down his throat's emotion, the stilling of his beating pulses, and he stood before her calmly self-possessed; holding out his hand; speaking in low, clear tones.

"Allow me to offer you my good wishes for your welfare, Mrs. Massingbird."

"Thank you; thank you very much," replied Sibylla, dropping his hand, avoiding his eye, and going on to find Mrs. Verner.

"Good-bye, Lionel," said Frederick Massingbird. "You are going out, I see."

Lionel shook his hand cordially. Rival though he had proved to him, he did not blame Frederick Massingbird; he was too just to throw blame where it was not due.

"Fare you well, Frederick. I sincerely hope you will have a prosperous voyage; and that you will come safely home again."

All this was over, and they had sailed; Dr. West having exacted a solemn promise from his son-in-law that they should leave for home the very instant that John's property had been realized. And now, a fortnight after it, Mr. Verner was taken—as was believed—for death. He himself believed so. He knew what his own disorder was; he knew that the moment the water began to mount, and had attained a certain height, his life would be gone.

"How many hours have I to live?" he inquired of Dr. West.

"Probably some days," was the answer.

What could it have been that was troubling the mind of Mr. Verner? That it was worldly trouble was certain. That other trouble, which has been known to distract the minds of the dying, to fill them with agony, was absent from his. On that score he was in perfect peace. But that some very great anxiety was racking him might be seen by the most casual observer. It had been racking him for a long time past, and it was growing worse now. And it appeared to be what he could not, or would not, speak of.

The news of the dangerous change in the master of Verner's Pride circulated through the vicinity, and it brought forth, amidst other of his friends, Mr. Bitterworth. This was the second day of the change. Tynn received Mr. Bitterworth in the hall.

"There's no hope, sir, I'm afraid," was Tynn's answer to his inquiries. "He's not in much bodily pain, but he seems dreadfully anxious and uneasy."

"What about?" asked Mr. Bitterworth, who was a little man, with a red face.

"Nobody knows, sir: he doesn't say. For myself, I can only think it must be about something connected with the estate. What else can it be?"

"I suppose I can see him, Tynn?"

"I'll ask, sir. He refuses visitors, but I dare say he'll admit you."

Lionel came to Mr. Bitterworth, in the drawing-room. "My uncle will see you," he said, after greetings had passed.

"Tynn informs me that he appears uneasy in his mind," observed Mr. Bitterworth.

"A man so changed, as he has been the last two years, I have never seen," replied Lionel. "None can have failed to remark it. From entire calmness of mind, he has exhibited anxiety and restlessness—I may say irritability. Mrs. Verner is ill," Lionel added, as they were ascending the stairs. "She has not been out of bed for two days."

Not in his study now; he had done with the lower part of the house for ever; but in his bed-chamber, never to come out of it alive, was Mr. Verner. They had got him up, and he sat in an easy-chair by the bedside, partially dressed, and wrapped in his dressing-gown. On his pale, worn face there were the unmistakable signs of death. He and Mr. Bitterworth were left alone.

"So you have come to see the last of me, Bitterworth!" was the remark of Mr. Verner.

"Not the last yet, I hope," heartily responded Mr. Bitterworth, who was an older man than Mr. Verner, but hale and active. "You may rally from this attack and get about again. Remember how many serious attacks you have had."

"None like this. The end must come; and it has come now. Hush, Bitterworth! To speak of recovery to me is worse than child's play. I *know* my time has come. And I am glad to meet it, for it releases me from a world of care."

"Were there any in this world who might be supposed to be exempt from care, it is you," said Mr. Bitterworth, leaning towards the invalid, his hale old face expressing the concern he felt. "I should have judged you to be perfectly free from earthly care. You have no children: what can be troubling you?"

"Would to Heaven I had children!" exclaimed Mr. Verner: and the remark appeared to break from him involuntarily, in the bitterness of his heart.

"You have your brother's son, your heir, Lionel."

"He is no heir of mine," returned Mr. Verner, with, if possible, added bitterness.

"No heir of yours!" repeated Mr. Bitterworth, gazing at his friend, and wondering whether he had lost his senses.

Mr. Verner, on his part, gazed on vacancy: his thoughts evidently cast in the past. He sat in his old favourite attitude: his hands clasped on the head of his stick, and his face bent down upon it. "Bitterworth," said he, presently, "when I made my will years ago, after my father's death, I appointed you one of the executors."

"I know it," replied Mr. Bitterworth. "I was associated—as you gave me to understand—with Sir Rufus Hautley."

"Ay. After the boy came of age,"—and Mr. Bitterworth knew that he alluded to Lionel—"I added his name to that of yours and Sir Rufus. Legacies apart, the estate was all left to him."

"Of course it was," assented Mr. Bitterworth.

"Since then, I have seen well to make an alteration," continued Mr. Verner. "I mention it to you, Bitterworth, that you may not be surprised when you hear the will read. Also I would tell you that I made the change of my own free act and judgment, unbiased by any one, and that I did not make it without ample cause. The estate is not left to Lionel Verner, but to Frederick Massingbird."

Mr. Bitterworth had small round eyes, but they opened now to their utmost width. "What did you say?" he repeated, after a pause; as a man out of breath.

"Strictly speaking, the estate is not bequeathed to Frederick Massingbird: he will inherit it in consequence of John's death," quietly went on Mr. Verner. "It was left to John Massingbird, and to Frederick after him, should he survive him. Failing both——"

"And I am still executor?" interrupted Mr. Bitterworth, in a tone raised rather above the orthodox key for a sick-room.

"You and Sir Rufus. That, so far, is not altered."

"Then I will not act. No, Stephen Verner, long and close as our friendship has been, I will not countenance an act of injustice. I will not be your executor: unless Verner's Pride goes, as it ought, to Lionel Verner."

"Lionel has forfeited it."

"Forfeited it!—how can he have forfeited it? Is this"—Mr. Bitterworth was given to speak in plain terms when excited—"is this the underhand work of Mrs. Verner?"

"Peace, Bitterworth! Mrs. Verner knows nothing of the change. Her surviving son knows nothing of it; John knew nothing of it. They have no idea but that Lionel is still the heir. You should not jump to unjust conclusions. Not one of them has ever asked me how my property was left; or has attempted, by the smallest word, to influence me in its disposal."

"Then, what has influenced you? Why have you done it?" demanded Mr. Bittterworth, his voice becoming more subdued.

To this question Mr. Verner did not immediately reply. He appeared not to have done with the defence of his wife and her sons.

"Mrs. Verner is not of a covetous nature; she is not unjust, and I believe that she would wish the estate willed to Lionel, rather than to her sons. She knows no good reason why it should not be willed to him. And for those sons—do you suppose either of them would have gone out to Australia, had he been cognizant of his being heir to Verner's Pride?"

"Why have you willed it away from Lionel?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Mr. Verner, in a sharp tone of pain. It betrayed to Mr. Bitterworth what sharper pain the step itself must have cost him.

"Is it *this* which has been on your mind, Verner—disturbing your closing years?"

"Ay, it is that: nothing else," wailed Mr. Verner; "nothing else! nothing else! Has it not been enough to disturb me?" he added, putting the question in loud, quick accents. "Setting aside my love for Lionel, which was great,—setting aside my finding him unworthy, it has been a bitter trial to me to leave Verner's Pride to a Massingbird. I have never loved the Massingbirds," he continued, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"If Lionel *were* unworthy, you might have left it to Jan," spoke Mr. Bitterworth.

"Lady Verner has thrown too much estrangement between Jan and me. No. I would rather even a Massingbird had it than Jan."

"If Lionel *were* unworthy, I said," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "I cannot believe that he is so. How has he proved himself so? What has he done?"

Mr. Verner put up his hands as if to ward off some imaginary phantom, and his pale face turned of a leaden hue.

"Never ask me," he whispered. "I cannot tell you. I have had to bear it about with me," he continued, with an irrepressible burst of anguish: "to bear it here, within me, in silence; never breathing a word of my knowledge to him, or to any one."

"Some folly must have come to your cognizance," observed Mr. Bitterworth: "though I had deemed Lionel Verner to be more free from the sins of hot-blooded youth than are most men. I have believed him to be a true gentleman in the best sense of the word—a good and honourable man."

"A silent stream runs deep," remarked Mr. Verner.

Mr. Bitterworth drew his chair nearer to his friend, and, bending towards him, resumed solemnly.

"Verner's Pride of right (speaking in accordance with our English notions) belonged to your brother, Sir Lionel. It would have been his, as you know, had he lived but a month or two longer; your father would not have willed it away from him. After him it would have been Lionel's. Sir Lionel died too soon, and it was left to you; but what injunction from your father was it that accompanied it? Forgive my asking you the question, Stephen."

"Do you think I have forgotten it?" returned Mr. Verner. "It has cost me my peace—my happiness to will it away from Lionel. To see Verner's Pride in possession of any but a Verner will trouble

me so—if, indeed, we are permitted in the next world still to mark what goes on in this—that I shall scarcely rest quietly in my grave."

"You have no more—I must speak plainly, Stephen—I believe that you have no more right to will away the estate from Lionel than you would have were he heir-at-law. Many have said—I am sure you must be aware that they have—that you have kept him out of it; have enjoyed what ought to have been his, ever since his grandfather's death."

"Have *you* said it?" angrily asked Mr. Verner.

"I have neither said it nor thought it. When your father informed me that he had willed the estate to you, Sir Lionel being dead, I answered him that I thought he had done well and wisely; that you had far more right to it, for your life, than the boy Lionel. But, Stephen, I should never sanction your leaving it away from him after you. Had you possessed children of your own, they should never have been allowed to displace Lionel. He is your elder brother's son, remember."

Mr. Verner sat as one in dire perplexity. It would appear that there was a struggle going on in his own mind.

"I know, I know," he presently said in answer. "The worry, the uncertainty, as to what I ought to do, has destroyed the peace of my later days. I altered my will when smarting under the discovery of his unworthiness: but, even then a doubt as to whether I was doing right caused me to name him as inheritor, should the Massingbirds die."

"Why, that must have been a paradox!" exclaimed Mr. Bitterworth. "Lionel Verner should inherit before all, or not inherit at all. What your ground of complaint against him is, I know not; but whatever it may be, it can be no excuse for your willing Verner's Pride away from him. Some youthful folly of his came to your knowledge, I conclude."

"Not folly. Call it sin: call it crime," vehemently replied Mr. Verner.

"As you please; you know its proper term better than I. For one solitary instance of—what you please to name it—you should not blight his whole prospects for life. Lionel's general conduct is so irreproachable (unless he be the craftiest hypocrite under the sun) that you may well pardon one defalcation. Are you sure you were not mistaken?"

"I am sure. I hold proof positive."

"Well, I leave that. I say that you might forgive him, whatever it may be, remembering how few his offences are. He would make a faithful master of Verner's Pride. Compare him with Fred Massingbird! Pshaw!"

Mr. Verner did not answer. His face had a troubled look upon

it, as it leaned out from the top of his stick. Mr. Bitterworth laid his hand upon his friend's knee persuasively.

"Do not go out of the world committing an act of injustice; an act, too, that is irreparable, and of which the injustice must last for ever. Stephen, I will not leave you until you consent to repair what you have done."

"It has been upon my mind to do it since I was taken worse yesterday," murmured Stephen Verner. "Our Saviour taught us to forgive. Had it been against me only that he sinned, I would have forgiven him long ago."

"You will forgive him now?"

"Forgiveness does not lie with me. It was not against me, I say, that he sinned. Let him ask forgiveness of God and of his own conscience. But he shall have Verner's Pride."

"Better that you should see it in its proper light at the eleventh hour, than not at all, Stephen," said Mr. Bitterworth. "By every law of right and justice, Verner's Pride, after you, belongs to Lionel."

"You speak well, Bitterworth, when you call it the eleventh hour," observed Mr. Verner. "If I am to make this change, you must get Matiss here without an instant's delay. See him yourself, and bring him back with you. Tell him how great the necessity is. He will make more haste for you than he might for one of my servants."

"Does he know of the bequest to the Massingbirds?"

"Of course he knows it He made the will. I have never employed any one but Matiss since I came into the estate."

Mr. Bitterworth, feeling there was little time to be lost, left the room without further delay. He was anxious that Lionel should have his own. Not so much because he liked and esteemed Lionel, as that he possessed a strong sense of justice within him. Lionel heard him leaving the sick-room, and came to him, but Mr. Bitterworth would not stop.

"I cannot wait," he said. "I am bound on an errand for your uncle."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WILL ALTERED.

MR. BITTERWORTH was bound to the house of the lawyer, Matiss, who lived and had his office in the new part of Deerham, down by Dr. West's. People wondered that he managed to make a living in so small a place: but he evidently did make one. Most of the gentry in the vicinity employed him for trifling matters, and he held

one or two good agencies. He kept no clerk. He was at home when Mr. Bitterworth entered, writing at a desk in his small office, which had maps hung round it. A quick-speaking man, with dark hair and a good-natured face.

"Are you busy, Matiss?" began Mr. Bitterworth, when he entered, and the lawyer looked at him through the railings of his desk.

"Not particularly, Mr. Bitterworth. "Do you want me?"

"Mr. Verner wants you. He has sent me to bring you to him without delay. You have heard that there's a change in him?"

"Oh yes, I have heard it," replied the lawyer. "I am at his service, Mr. Bitterworth."

"He wants his last will altered. Remedied, I should say," continued Mr. Bitterworth, looking the lawyer full in the face, and nodding confidentially.

"Altered to what it was before?" eagerly cried the lawyer.

Mr. Bitterworth nodded again. "I called in upon him this morning, and in the course of conversation it came out what he had done about Verner's Pride. And now he wants it undone."

"I am glad of it; I am glad of it, Mr. Bitterworth. Between ourselves—though I mean no disrespect to them—the young Massingbirds were not fit heirs for Verner's Pride. Mr. Lionel Verner is."

"He is the rightful heir as well as the fitting one, Matiss," added Mr. Bitterworth, leaning over the desk railings, while the lawyer was hastily putting his papers in order, preparatory to leaving them. "What was the cause of his willing it away from Lionel Verner?"

"It's more than I can tell. He gave no clue whatever to his motive. Many and many a time have I thought it over since, but I never came near fathoming it. I told Mr. Verner that it was not a just thing, when I took his instructions for the fresh will. That is, I intimated as much; it was not my place, of course, to speak out my mind offensively to Mr. Verner. Dr. West said a great deal more to him than I did; but he could make no impression."

"Was Dr. West consulted, then, by Mr. Verner?"

"Not at all. When I called at Verner's Pride with the fresh will for Mr. Verner to execute, it happened that Tynn was out. He and one of the other servants were to have witnessed the signature. Dr. West came in at the time, and Mr. Verner said he would do as a witness in Tynn's place. Dr. West remonstrated most strongly when he found what it was, for Mr. Verner told him in confidence what had been done. The doctor at first refused to put his hand to anything so unjust. He protested that the

public would cry shame, would say John Massingbird had no human right to Verner's Pride, would suspect he had obtained it by fraud, or by some sort of underhand work. Mr. Verner replied that I—Matiss—could contradict that. At last the doctor signed it."

"When was this?"

"It was the very week after John started for Australia. I wondered why Mr. Verner should have allowed him to go, if he meant to make him his heir. Dr. West wondered also, and said so to Mr. Verner, but Mr. Verner made no reply."

"Mr. Verner has just told me that neither the Massingbirds nor Mrs. Verner knew anything of the fresh will. I understood him to imply that no person whatever was cognizant of it but himself and you."

"And Dr. West. No one else."

"And he gave *no* reason for the alteration—either to you or to Dr. West?"

"None at all. Beyond the assertion that Lionel had displeased him. Dr. West would have pressed him upon the point, but Mr. Verner coldly repulsed him. He insisted upon our secrecy as to the new will; which we promised, and I dare say have never violated. I know I can answer for myself."

They hastened back to Verner's Pride. And the lawyer, in the presence of Mr. Bitterworth, received instructions for a codicil, revoking the bequest of the estate to the Massingbirds, and bestowing it absolutely upon Lionel Verner. The bequests to others, legacies, instructions in the former will, were all to stand. It was a somewhat elaborate will; hence Mr. Verner suggested that that will, so far, could still stand, and the necessary alteration be made by a codicil.

"You can have it ready by this evening?" Mr. Verner remarked to the lawyer.

"Before then, if you like, sir. It won't take me long to draw that up. One's pen goes glibly when one's heart is in the work. I am glad you are willing it back to Mr. Lionel."

"Draw it up then, and bring it here as soon as it's ready. You won't find me gone out," Mr. Verner added, with a faint attempt at a joke.

The lawyer did as he was bid, and returned to Verner's Pride about five o'clock in the afternoon. He found Dr. West there. It was somewhat singular that the doctor should again be present, as he had been at the previous signing. And yet not singular, for he was now in frequent attendance on the patient.

"How do you feel yourself this afternoon, sir?" asked Mr. Matiss when he entered, his great-coat buttoned up, his hat in his

hand, his gloves on; showing no signs that he had any professional document about him, or that he had called in for any earthly reason, except to inquire politely after the state of the master of Verner's Pride.

"Pretty well, Matiss. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll do it at once, then. Dr. West," Mr. Verner added, turning to the doctor, "I have been making an alteration in my will. You were one of the former witnesses; will you be so again?"

"With pleasure. An alteration consequent upon the death of John Massingbird, I presume?"

"No. I should have made it, had he been still alive. Verner's Pride must go to Lionel. I cannot die easy unless it does."

"But—I thought you said Lionel had done—had done something to forfeit it?" interrupted Dr. West, whom the words appeared to have taken by surprise.

"To forfeit my esteem and good opinion. Those he can never enjoy again. But I doubt whether I have a right to deprive him of Verner's Pride. I begin to think I have not the right. I believe that the world generally will think I have not. It may be, that a Higher Power, to whom alone I am responsible, will judge I have not. There's no denying that he will make a more fitting master of it than would Frederick Massingbird; and for myself I shall die the easier for knowing that a Verner will succeed me. Mr. Matiss, be so kind as to read over the deed."

The lawyer produced a parchment from one of his ample pockets, unfolded, and proceeded to read it aloud. It was the codicil, drawn up in due form, bequeathing Verner's Pride to Lionel Verner. It was short, and he read it in a clear, distinct voice.

"Will you like to sign it, sir?" he asked, as he laid it down.

"When I have read it myself," replied Mr. Verner.

The lawyer smiled as he handed it to him. All his clients were not so cautious. Some might have said, "so suspicious."

Mr. Verner found the codicil all right, and the bell was rung for Tynn. Mrs. Tynn happened to come in at the same moment. She was retreating when she saw business going forward, but her master spoke to her.

"You need not go, Mrs. Tynn. Bring a pen and ink here."

So the housekeeper remained present while the deed was executed. Mr. Verner signed it, proclaiming it his last will and testament, and Dr. West and Tynn affixed their signatures. The lawyer and Mrs. Tynn stood looking on.

Mr. Verner folded it up with his own hands, and sealed it.

"Bring me my desk," he said, looking at Mrs. Tynn.

The desk was kept in a closet in the room, and she brought it forth. Mr. Verner locked the parchment within it.

"You will remember where it is," he said, touching the desk, and looking at the lawyer. "The will is also here."

Mrs. Tynn carried the desk back again; and Dr. West and the lawyer left the house together.

Later, when Mr. Verner was in bed, he spoke to Lionel, who was sitting with him.

"You will give heed to carry out my directions, Lionel, so far as I have left directions, after you come into power?"

"I will, sir," replied Lionel, never having had the faintest suspicion that he had been near losing the inheritance.

"And be more active abroad than I have been. I have left too much to Roy and others. You are young and strong; don't you leave it to them. Look into things with your own eyes."

"Indeed I will. My dear uncle," he added, bending over the bed, and speaking in an earnest tone, "I will endeavour to act in all things as though in your sight, accountable to God and my own conscience. Verner's Pride shall have no unworthy master."

"Try and live so as to redeem the past."

"Yes," said Lionel. He did not see what precise part of it he had to redeem, but he was earnestly anxious to defer to the words of a dying man. "Uncle, may I dare to say that I hope you will live yet?" he gently said.

"It is useless, Lionel. The world is closing for me.

It was closing for him even then, as he spoke, closing rapidly. Before another afternoon had come round, the master of Verner's Pride had quitted that, and all other pride, for ever

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CHAPTER XVII.

DISAPPEARED.

SWEEPING down from Verner's Pride towards the church at Deerham, came the long funeral train. Mutes with their plumes and batons, relays of bearers, the bier. It had been Mr. Verner's expressed desire that he should be carried to the grave, that no hearse or coaches should be used.

"Bury me quietly; bury me without show," had been his charge. And yet a show it was, that procession, if only from its length. Close to the coffin walked the heir, Lionel; Jan and Dr. West came next; Mr. Bitterworth and Sir Rufus Hautley. Other gentlemen were there, followers or pall-bearers; the tenants followed; the servants came last. A long, long line, black and slow—moving; and spectators gathered on the side of the road, under the hedges,

and in the upper windows at Deerham, to see it pass. The lower windows were closed.

A brave heir, a brave master of Verner's Pride! was the universal thought, as all eyes were turned on Lionel, his tall, noble form, his pale, calm face, his dark hair. He chose to walk bareheaded, his hat, with its streamers, borne in his hand. When handed to him in the hall he had not put it on, but went out as he was, carrying it. The rest, those behind him, did not follow his example; they wore their hats; but Lionel was probably unconscious of it, probably never gave it a thought.

At the churchyard entrance they were met by the Vicar of Deerham, the Reverend James Bourne. All hats came off then, as his voice rose, commencing the service. Nearly one of the last walked old Matthew Frost. He had not gone to Verner's Pride, the walk so far was beyond him now, but fell in at the churchyard gate. The fine, upright, hale man whom you saw at the commencement of this history had changed into a bowed, broken mourner. Rachel's fate had done that. On the right, as they moved up the churchyard, was the mound which covered the remains of Rachel. Old Matthew did not look towards it; as he passed it he only bent his head the lower. But many others turned their heads; they remembered her that day.

In the middle of the church, open now, dark and staring, was the vault of the Verners. There lay already within it Stephen Verner's father, his first wife, and the little child Rachel, Rachel Frost's foster-sister. A grand grave this, compared with that lowly mound outside; and there was a grand descriptive tablet on the walls to the Verners, while the mound was nameless. By the side of the large tablet was a smaller one, placed there to the memory of brave Sir Lionel Verner, who had fallen near Moultan. Lionel involuntarily glanced up at it, as he stood over the vault, and a wish came across him that his father's remains were here, amidst them, instead of in that far-off grave.

The service was soon over, and Stephen Verner was left in his resting-place. Then the procession, shorn of its chief and prominent feature, went back to Verner's Pride. Lionel wore his hat this time.

In the large state drawing-room, in her mourning robes and widow's cap, sat Mrs. Verner. She had not been out of her chamber, until within the last ten minutes, since before Mr. Verner's death; scarcely out of bed. As they passed into the room—the lawyer, Dr. West, Jan, Mr. Bitterworth, and Sir Rufus Hautley—they thought how Mrs. Verner had changed, and how ill she looked: not that her florid complexion was any paler. She had, indeed, changed since the news of John Massingbird's death; and some

of them believed that she would not be very long after Mr. Verner.

They had assembled there for the purpose of hearing the will read. Mr. Verner's desk was brought forward and laid upon the table. Lionel, taking his late uncle's keys from his pocket, unlocked it, and delivered a parchment which it contained to Mr. Matiss. The lawyer saw at a glance that it was the old will, not the codicil, and he waited for Lionel to hand him also the latter.

"Be so kind as read it, Mr. Matiss," said Lionel, pointing to the will.

It had to be read: and it was of no consequence whether the codicil was taken from the desk before reading the original will, or afterwards. So Mr. Matiss unfolded it, and began.

It was a somewhat elaborate will—which has been previously hinted. Verner's Pride, with its rich lands, its fine income, was left to John Massingbird; in the event of John's death, childless, it went to Frederick; in the event of Frederick's death, childless, it passed to Lionel Verner. There the conditions ended: so that, if it did lapse to Lionel, it lapsed to him absolutely. But it would appear that the contingency of both the Massingbirds dying had been only barely glanced at by Mr. Verner. Five hundred pounds were left to Lionel; five hundred to Jan; five hundred to Decima; nothing to Lady Verner. Mrs. Verner was suitably provided for, and there were bequests to servants. Twenty-five pounds "for a mourning-ring" were bequeathed to each of the two executors, Sir Rufus Hautley and Mr. Bitterworth; and old Matthew Frost had forty pounds a year for his life. Such were the chief features of the will; and the utter astonishment it produced on the minds and countenances of some of the listeners, was something to be seen. Lionel, Mrs. Verner, Jan, and Sir Rufus Hautley were petrified.

Sir Rufus rose. He was a thin, stately man, always dressed in hessian boots and the old-fashioned shirt-frill. A proud, impassive countenance was his, but it darkened now. "I will not act," he began. "I beg to state my opinion that the will is an unfair one——"

"I beg your pardon, Sir Rufus," interrupted the lawyer. "Allow me a word. This is not the final will of Mr. Verner: much of it has been revoked by a recent codicil. Verner's Pride comes to Mr. Lionel. You will find the codicil in the desk, sir," he added, to Lionel.

Lionel, his pale face haughty and quite as impassive as that of Sir Rufus, for anything like injustice angered him, opened the desk again. "I was not aware," he observed. "My uncle told me on the day of his death that the will would be found in his desk: I supposed that to be it."

"It is the will," said Mr. Matiss. "But he caused me to draw up a later codicil, which revoked the bequest of Verner's Pride. It is left to you absolutely."

Lionel searched in the desk. The few papers in it appeared to be arranged with the most methodical neatness: but they were small, chiefly old letters. "I don't see anything like a codicil," he observed. "You had better look yourself, Mr. Matiss: you will probably recognize it."

Mr. Matiss advanced to the desk and looked in it. "It is not here!" he exclaimed.

Not there! They gazed at him, at the desk, at Lionel, half puzzled. The lawyer with rapid fingers began taking out the papers one by one.

"No, it is not here, in either compartment. I saw it was not, the moment I looked in; but it was well to be sure. Where has it been put?"

"I really do not know anything about it," answered Lionel, to whom he looked as he spoke. "My uncle told me the will would be found in his desk. And the desk has not been opened since his death."

"Could Mr. Verner himself have changed its place?" asked the lawyer, speaking with more than usual quickness, and turning over the papers with great rapidity.

"Not after he told me where the will was. He did not touch the desk after that. It was only just before his death. So far as I know, he had not had his desk brought out of the closet for days."

"Yes, he had," said the lawyer. "After he had executed the codicil on the evening before his death, he called for his desk, and put the parchment into it. It lay on the top of the will—this one. I saw that much."

"I can testify that the codicil was locked in the desk, and that the desk was then returned to the closet, for I happened to be present," spoke up Dr. West. "I was one of the witnesses to the codicil, as I had been to the will. Mr. Verner must have moved it himself to some safer place."

"What place could be safer than the desk in his own bedroom?" cried the lawyer. "And why move the codicil and not the will?"

"True," assented Dr. West. "But—I don't see—it could not get out of the desk without being moved out. And who would presume to meddle with it except himself? Who took possession of his keys when he died?" added the doctor, looking round at Mrs. Verner.

"I did," said Lionel. "And they have not been out of my possession since. Nothing whatever has been touched: desk, drawers, every place belonging to him are as they were left when he died."

Of course, the only thing to do was to look for the codicil. Great interest was excited; and it appeared to be altogether so mysterious an affair that one and all flocked upstairs to the room; the room where he had died; from which the coffin had but just been borne. Mrs. Tynn was summoned; and when she found what was amiss, she grew excited; fearing possibly that blame might in some way fall upon her. Excepting Lionel himself, she was the only one who had been alone with Mr. Verner: of course, the only one who could have had an opportunity of tampering with the desk. And that, only when the patient slept.

"I protest that the desk was never touched, after I returned it to the closet by my master's desire, when the parchment was put into it!" she cried. "My master never asked for his desk again, and I never so much as opened the closet. It was only the afternoon before he died, gentlemen, that the deed was signed."

"Where did he keep his keys?" asked Mr. Bitterworth.

"In the little table-drawer at his elbow, sir. The day he took to his bed, he wanted his keys, and I got them out of his dressing-gown pocket for him. 'You needn't put them back,' he said to me, 'let them remain inside this little drawer.' And there they were till he died, when I gave them up to Mr. Lionel."

"You must have allowed some one to get into the room, Mrs. Tynn," said Dr. West.

"I never was away from the room above two minutes at a time, sir," was the woman's reply. "And then either Mr. Lionel or Tynn would be with him. But, if any one did come in, it's not possible they would get at the master's desk to take out a paper. What good would the paper do any of the servants?"

Mrs. Tynn's question was a pertinent one. The servants were neither the better nor the worse for the codicil: whether it were forthcoming, or not, it made no difference to them. Sir Rufus Hautley inquired upon this point, and the lawyer satisfied him.

"The codicil was to this effect alone," he explained. "It changed the positions of Mr. Lionel and Mr. John Massingbird, the one for the other, as they had stood in the will. Mr. Lionel came into the inheritance, and Mr. Frederick Massingbird to five hundred pounds only. Mr. John was gone—as every one knows."

"They two, Mr. Lionel and Frederick Massingbird, were the only parties interested in the codicil, then?"

"The only two. John Massingbird's name was mentioned, but only to revoke all former bequests to him."

"Then—were John Massingbird alive, he could not now succeed to the estate!" cried Sir Rufus.

"He could not, Sir Rufus," replied the lawyer. "He would be debarred from all benefit under Mr. Verner's will. That is, pro-

vided we can come across the codicil. Failing that, he would succeed, were he in life, to Verner's Pride."

"The codicil *must* be found," cried Mr. Bitterworth, growing heated. "Don't say, 'if we can come across it,' Matiss."

"Very good, Mr. Bitterworth. I'm sure I should be glad to see it found. Where else are we to look?"

Where else, indeed! That Mr. Verner could not leave the room, to conceal the codicil, was an indisputable fact; and no one else seemed to know anything whatever about it. The only one personally interested in the suppression of the codicil was Frederick Massingbird; and he, hundreds of miles away, could neither have secured it nor sent his ghost to secure it. In a lesser degree, Mrs. Verner and Dr. West were interested: the one in her son; the other in that son's wife. But the doctor was not an inmate of Verner's Pride; and Mrs. Tynn could have testified that she had been present in the room and never left it during each of the doctor's professional visits, subsequent to the drawing up of the codicil. As for Mrs. Verner, she had not left her bed. Mr. Verner, at the last, had gone off suddenly, without pain, and there had been no time to call his wife. Mrs. Tynn excused the negligence by saying she did not think her master had been quite so near his end: and it was a true excuse. But no one dreamt of attaching suspicion to Mrs. Verner, or to Dr. West. "I would rather Lionel had succeeded, than Frederick," spoke the former honestly, some faint idea that people might think she was pleased, suggesting the avowal. "Lionel has more right than Fred to Verner's Pride."

"More right!" ejaculated Dr. West, warmly. "Frederick Massingbird has *no* right, by the side of Lionel Verner. Why Mr. Verner ever willed it away from Lionel we could not understand."

"Fred needn't take it—even if the codicil can't be found; he can give it back to Lionel by deed of gift," said practical Jan. "*I* should."

"That my master meant Mr. Lionel to succeed, is certain," interposed Tynn, the butler. "Nearly the last word he said to me, before the breath went out of his body, was an injunction to serve Mr. Lionel faithfully at Verner's Pride, as I had served him. There can be no difficulty in Mr. Lionel's succeeding, when my master's intentions were made so plain."

"Be quiet, Tynn," said Lionel. "I succeed legally to Verner's Pride, or I will not succeed at all."

"That's true," acquiesced the lawyer. "A will is a will, and must be acted upon. How on earth has that codicil got spirited away?"

How indeed! But for the fact, so positive and palpable before them, of the missing codicil, they would have declared the loss to

be an impossibility. Up stairs and down, the house was vainly searched for it; and the conclusion was at length unwillingly come to, that Mr. Verner had repented of his bequest, had taken the codicil out of the desk, and burnt it. The suggestion came from Mr. Bitterworth: and Mrs. Tynn acknowledged that it was just possible Mr. Verner's strength would allow him to accomplish so much, whilst her back was turned. And yet, how reconcile this with his dying charges to Lionel, touching the management of the estate?

The broad fact that there was the will, and that alone to act upon, untempered by a codicil, shone out all too clearly. Lionel Verner was displaced, and Frederick Massingbird was the heir.

Oh, if some impossible electric telegraph could only have carried the news over the waves of the sea, to the ship, ploughing her way through the ocean; if the two fugitives in her could only have been spirited back again, as the codicil seemed to have been spirited away, how triumphantly would they have entered upon their sway at Verner's Pride!

CHAPTER XVIII.

PERPLEXITY.

It was a terrible blow; there was no doubt of that: very terrible to Lionel Verner, so proud and sensitive. Do not take the word proud in its wrong meaning. He did not set himself up for being better than others, or think every one else dirt beneath his feet: but he was proud of his independence, of his unstained name—he was proud to own that fine place, Verner's Pride. And now Verner's Pride was dashed from him, and his independence seemed to have gone out with the blow, and a slight seemed to have fallen upon him, if not upon his name.

He had surely counted upon Verner's Pride. He had believed himself as undoubtedly its heir, as though he had been Stephen Verner's eldest son, and the estate had been entailed. Never for a moment had a doubt that he would succeed entered his own mind, or been imparted to it from any quarter. In the week that intervened between Mr. Verner's death and burial, he had acted as entire master. It was he who issued orders—from himself now, not from any other—it was he who was appealed to. People, of their own accord, began to call him Mr. Verner. Very peremptory indeed had been a certain interview of his with Roy the bailiff. Not, as formerly, had he said, "Roy, my uncle desires me to say so and so;" or, "Roy, you must not act in that way, it would displease

Mr. Verner;" but he issued his own clear and unmistakable orders, as master of Verner's Pride. He and Roy all but came to loggerheads that day; and they would have come quite to it, but that Roy remembered in time that he, before whom he stood, was his head and chief—his master to keep him on, or to discharge him at pleasure, and who would brook no more insubordination to his will. So Roy bowed, and ate humble-pie, and hated Lionel all the while. Lionel had seen this; he had seen how the man longed to rebel, had he dared: and a flush of pain rose to his brow as he remembered that in that interview he had *not* been the master; that he was less master now than he had ever been. Roy would likewise remember it.

Mr. Bitterworth took Lionel aside. Sir Rufus Hautley had gone out after the blow had fallen, when the codicil had been searched for in vain—had gone out in anger, shaking the dust from his feet, declining to act as executor, to accept the mourning-ring, to have to do with anything so palpably unjust. The rest lingered yet. It seemed that they could not talk of it sufficiently, could never tire of bringing forth new conjectures, or of giving vent to all the phases of their astonishment.

"What could have been your offence, that your uncle should alter his will, two years ago, and leave the estate from you?" Mr. Bitterworth inquired of Lionel, drawing him aside.

"I am unable to conjecture," replied Lionel. "I find by the date of this will that it was made the week after my departure for Paris, when Jan met with his accident. He was not displeased with me then, so far as I knew——"

"Did you go to Paris in opposition to his wish?" interrupted Mr. Bitterworth.

"On the contrary, he hurried me off. When the news of Jan's accident arrived, and I went to my uncle with the message, he said to me,—I remember his very words,—'Go off at once; don't lose an instant,' and he handed me money for the journey and for my stay there; for Jan, also, should any great expense be needed for him; and in an hour I was on my way. I stayed six months in Paris, as you may remember—the latter portion of the time for my own pleasure. When I returned home, I was perfectly thunderstruck at the change in my uncle's appearance, and at the change in his manner towards me. He was a bowed, broken man, with—as it seemed to me—some care upon his mind: and, that I had offended him in some very unfortunate way, and to a great extent, was evident. I never could get any solution of it, though I asked him repeatedly. I do not know, to this hour, what I had done. Sometimes I would think he was angry at my remaining so long away; but, if so, he might have given me a hint to return, or have suffered some one else to give it, for he never wrote to me."

"Never wrote to you?" repeated Mr. Bitterworth.

"Not once, the whole of the time I was away. I wrote to him often; but if he had occasion to send me a message, Mrs. Verner or Fred Massingbird would write it. Of course, this will, disinheriting me, proves that my staying away could not have been the cause of displeasure—it is dated only the week after I left."

"Whatever may have been the cause, it is a grievous wrong inflicted on you. He was my dear friend, and we have only now returned from laying him in his grave, but still I must speak out my sentiments—he had *no right* to deprive you of Verner's Pride."

Lionel knit his brow. That he thought the same; that he was feeling the injustice as a crying and unmerited wrong, was only too evident. Mr. Bitterworth had bent his head in reverie, stealing a glance at Lionel now and then.

"Is there nothing that you can charge your conscience with; no sin, which may have come to the knowledge of your uncle, and been deemed by him a just cause for disinheritance?" questioned Mr. Bitterworth, in a meaning tone.

"There is nothing, so help me Heaven!" replied Lionel, with emotion. "No sin, no shame; nothing that could be a cause, or the shade of a cause—I will not say for depriving me of Verner's Pride, but even for my uncle's displeasure."

"It struck me—you will not be offended with me, Lionel, if I mention something that struck me a week ago," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "I am a foolish old man, given to pondering much over cause and effect—to put two and two together, as we call it; and the day I first heard from your uncle that he had had good cause—so he put it—for depriving you of Verner's Pride, I went home, and set to thinking. The will had been made just after John Massingbird's departure for Australia. I brought before me all the events which had occurred about that same time, and there rose up naturally, towering above every other reminiscence, the unhappy business touching Rachel Frost. Lionel"—laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, and lowering his voice to a whisper—"did *you* lead the girl astray?"

Lionel drew himself up to his full height, his lip curling with displeasure.

"Mr. Bitterworth!"

"To suspect you, would never have occurred to me. I do not suspect you now. Were you to tell me that you were guilty of it, I should have difficulty in believing you. But it did occur to me that possibly your uncle may have cast that blame on you. I saw no other solution of the riddle. It could have been no light cause to induce Mr. Verner to deprive you of Verner's Pride. He was not a capricious man."

"It is impossible that my uncle could have cast a shade of suspicion on me, in regard to that affair," said Lionel. "He knew me better. At the moment of its occurrence, when no one could tell whom to suspect, I remember a few words were dropped which caused me to assure him *I* was not the guilty party, and he stopped me. He would not allow me even to speak of defence; he said he cast no suspicion on me."

"Well, it is a great mystery," said Mr. Bitterworth. "You must excuse me, Lionel. I thought Mr. Verner might in some way have taken up the idea. Evil tales, having no foundation, are sometimes palmed upon credulous ears, and do their work."

"Were it as you suggest, my uncle would have spoken to me, had it been only to reproach me," said Lionel. "It is a mystery, certainly, as you observe; but that is nothing compared with this mystery of the disappearance of the codicil——"

"I am going, Lionel," interrupted Jan, putting his head in at the room door.

"I must go, too," said Lionel, starting from the sideboard against which he had been leaning. "My mother must hear of this business from no one but me."

Verner's Pride emptied itself of its mourners, who betook themselves their respective ways. Lionel, taking the long crape from his hat, and retaining its deep mourning band alone, walked with a quick step through the village. He would not have *chosen* to be abroad that day, walking the very route in which he had just figured as chief in the procession, but to go without delay to Lady Verner was a duty. And a duty was never willingly omitted by Lionel Verner.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE REVELATION TO LADY VERNER.

In the drawing-room at Deerham Court, in their new black dresses, sat Lady Verner and Decima: Lucy Tempest with them. Lady Verner held out her hand to Lionel when he entered, and lifted her face, a strange eagerness visible in its refinement.

"I thought you would come to me, Lionel!" she uttered. "I want to know a hundred things.—Decima, have the goodness to direct your reproachful looks elsewhere; not to me. Why should I be a hypocrite, and feign a sorrow for Stephen Verner which I do not feel? I know it is his burial-day as well as you know it; but I will not make that a reason for abstaining from questions on family topics, although they do relate to money and means that were once

his. I say it would be affectation to do so. Lionel," she deliberately continued, "has Jan an interest in Verner's Pride after you, or is it left to you unconditionally? And what residence is appointed for Mrs. Verner?"

Lionel leaned over the table, apparently to reach something that was lying on it, contriving to bring his lips close to Decima. "Go out of the room, and take Lucy with you," he whispered.

Decima received the hint promptly. She rose as of her own accord. "Lucy, let us leave mamma and Lionel alone. We will come back when your secrets are over," she added, turning round with a smile as she left the room, drawing Lucy with her.

"You don't speak, Lionel," impatiently cried Lady Verner. In truth he did not; he did not know how to begin. He rose, and approached her.

"Mother, can you bear disappointment?" he asked, taking her hand, and speaking gently, in spite of his agitation.

"Hush!" interrupted Lady Verner. "If you speak of 'disappointment' to me, you are no true son of mine. You are going to tell me that Stephen Verner has left nothing to me. Let me tell you, Lionel, that I would not have accepted it from him—and this I made known to him. Accept money from *him*. No. But I will accept it from my dear son"—looking at him with a smile—"now that he enjoys the revenues of Verner's Pride."

"It was not with money left, or not left, to you, that I was connecting disappointment," answered Lionel. "There is a greater disappointment in store for us than that, mother."

"A greater disappointment!" repeated Lady Verner, looking puzzled. "You are never to be saddled with the presence of Mrs. Verner at Verner's Pride, until her death!" she hastily added. A great disappointment, that would indeed have been; a grievous wrong, in the estimation of Lady Verner.

"Mother, Verner's Pride is not mine."

"Not yours!" she slowly said. "He *surely* has not done as his father did before him?—left it to the younger brother, over the head of the elder? He has never left it to Jan!"

"Neither to Jan nor to me. It is left to Frederick Massingbird. John would have had it, had he been alive."

Lady Verner's delicate features became crimson: before she could speak, they had assumed a deathlike pallor. "Don't play with me, Lionel," she gasped, an awful fear beating at her heart that he was *not* playing with her. "It cannot be left to the Massingbirds!"

He sat down by her side, and gave her the history in detail. Lady Verner caught at the codicil, as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"How could you terrify me?" she asked. "Verner's Pride is yours, Lionel. The codicil must be found."

"The conviction upon my mind is, that it never will be found," he resolutely answered. "Whoever took that codicil from the desk where is was placed, could have had only one motive in taking it—to deprive me of Verner's Pride. Rely upon it, it is effectually removed ere this, by burning, or otherwise. No. I already look upon the codicil as a thing that never existed. Verner's Pride is gone from us."

"But, Lionel, whom do you suspect? Who can have taken it? It is pretty nearly a hanging matter to steal a will!"

"I do not suspect any one," he emphatically answered. "Mrs. Tynn protests that no one could have approached the desk unseen by her. It is very unlikely that any one would attempt it. They must, first of all, have chosen a moment when my uncle was asleep; they must have got Mrs. Tynn from the room; they must have searched for and found the keys; they must have unlocked the desk, taken the codicil, relocked the desk, and replaced the keys. All this could not be done without time, and familiarity with facts. Not a servant in the house—except the Tynns—knew that the codicil was there, and they did not know its purport. But the Tynns are thoroughly trustworthy."

"It must have been Mrs. Verner——"

"Hush, mother! I cannot listen to that, even from you. Mrs. Verner was in bed—never out of it: she knew nothing whatever of the codicil. And, if she had known, you will, I hope, do her the justice to believe her incapable of meddling with it."

"She benefits by its loss at any rate," bitterly rejoined Lady Verner.

"Her son does. But, that he does, was entirely unknown to her. She never knew that Mr. Verner had willed the estate away from me; she never dreamt but that I, and no other, would be his successor. The accession of Frederick Massingbird is unwelcome to her, rather than the contrary: he has no right to it, and she feels that he has none. In the impulse of her surprise, she said aloud that she wished it had been left to me; and I am sure they were her true sentiments."

Lady Verner sat in silence, her white hands crossed on her black dress, her head bent down. Presently she lifted it.

"I do not fully understand you, Lionel. You appear to imply that—according to your belief—no one has touched the codicil. How, then, can it have got out of the desk?"

"There is only one solution to the mystery. It was suggested by Mr. Bitterworth; and, though I refused credence to it when he spoke, it has since been gaining upon my mind. He thinks my uncle must have repented of the codicil after it was made, and himself destroyed it. I should give full belief to this, were it not

that at the very last he spoke to me as the successor to Verner's Pride."

"He had no right to will away the estate from you," vehemently rejoined Lady Verner. "Was it not enough that he usurped your father's birthright, as Jacob usurped Esau's, keeping you out of it for years and years, but he must now deprive you of it for ever? Had you been dead—had there been any urgent reason why you should not succeed—Jan should have come in. Jan is the lawful heir, failing you. Mark me, Lionel, it will bring no good to Frederick Massingbird. Rights, violently diverted from their course, can bring only wrong and confusion in their train."

"It would be scarcely fair were it to bring him ill," spoke Lionel in his strict sense of justice. "Let us quit the subject, mother. It seems to be an unprofitable one, and my head is weary."

"Are you going tamely to give up the codicil for a bad job, without further search?" asked Lady Verner. "That I should live—that I should *live* to see Sibylla West's children inheriting Verner's Pride?" she passionately added.

Sibylla West's children! Lionel had enough pain at his heart, just then, without that shaft. A piercing shaft truly, and it brought the flush to his brow.

"We have looked already in every likely or possible place that we can think of; to-morrow morning, places unlikely and impossible will be searched," he said, in answer to his mother's question. "I shall be aided by the police: our searching is nothing, compared with what they can do. They go about it artistically."

"And—if the result should be failure?"

"It will be failure," spoke Lionel, in his conviction. "In that case I bid adieu to Verner's Pride."

"And come home here; will you not, Lionel?"

"For the present. And now, mother, having told you the ill news, and spoiled your rest, I must go back again."

Spoiled her rest! Ay, for many a day and night to come. Lionel disinherited! Verner's Pride gone from them for ever! A cry went forth from Lady Verner's heart. It had been the moment which she had looked forward to for years; and now that it was come, what had it brought?

"My own troubles make me selfish," said Lionel, turning back when he was half out at the door. "I forgot to tell you that Jan and Decima inherit five hundred pounds each."

"Five hundred pounds!" slightingly returned Lady Verner. "It is of a piece with the rest."

He did not add that he had five hundred also, failing the estate. It would have seemed worse mockery than all.

At the door, opposite the ante-room, on the other side of the

hall, was Decima. She had heard his step, and beckoned him in. It was the dining-room, but a pretty room still; for Lady Verner would have nothing about her inelegant or ugly, if she could help it. Lucy Tempest, in her favourite school attitude, was half-kneeling, half-sitting on the rug before the fire: but she rose when Lionel entered.

Decima entwined her arm within his, and led him up to the fireplace. "Did you bring mamma bad news?" she asked. "I thought I read it in your countenance."

"Very bad, Decima. Or I should not have sent you away while I told it."

"I suppose there's nothing left to mamma, or to Jan?"

"Mamma did not expect anything left to her, Decima. Don't go away, Lucy," he added, arresting Lucy Tempest, who, with good taste, was leaving them alone. "Stay and hear how poor I am: all Deerham knows it by this time. Verner's Pride is left away from me, Decima."

"Left away from you! From *you?*"

"Frederick Massingbird inherits it. I am passed over."

"Oh, Lionel!" The words were not uttered angrily, passionately, as Lady Verner's had been; but in a low, quiet voice, wrung from her, seemingly, by intense pain.

"And so there will be some additional trouble for you in the housekeeping line," went on Lionel, speaking gaily, and ignoring all the pain at *his* heart. "Turned out of Verner's Pride, I must come to you here—at least, for a time. What shall you say to that, Miss Lucy?"

Lucy was looking up at him gravely, not smiling in the least. "Is it true that you have lost Verner's Pride?" she asked.

"Quite true."

"But I thought it was yours—after Mr. Verner."

"I thought so too, until to-day," replied Lionel. "It ought to have been mine."

"What shall you do without it?"

"What, indeed!" he answered. "From being a landed country gentleman—as people have imagined me—I descend down to a poor fellow who must work for his bread and cheese before he eats it. Your eyes are laughing, Miss Lucy, but it is true."

"Bread and cheese costs nothing," said she.

"No? And the plate to put it on, and the knife you eat it with, and the glass of beer to help it down, and the coat you wear during the repast, and the room it's served in?—they cost something, Miss Lucy."

Lucy laughed. "I think you will always have bread and cheese," said she. "You look as though you would."

Decima turned to them: she had stood lost in a reverie, until Lionel's light tones aroused her from it. "*Which* is real, Lionel? This joking, or that you have lost Verner's Pride?"

"Both," he answered. "I am disinherited from Verner's Pride: better perhaps that I should joke, than cry over it."

"What will mamma do? What will mamma do?" breathed Decima. "She has so counted upon it. And what will you do, Lionel?"

"Decima!" came forth at this moment from the opposite room, in the imperative voice of Lady Verner; and Decima turned to it. Lucy addressed Lionel.

"One day at the Rectory there came a gipsy woman, wanting to tell our fortunes: she accosted us in the garden. Mr. Cust sent her away, and she was angry, and told him his star was not in the ascendant. I think it must be the case at present with your star, Mr. Verner."

Lionel smiled. "Yes, indeed."

"It is not only one thing that you are losing; it is more. First, that pretty girl whom you loved; then, Mr. Verner; and now, Verner's Pride. I wish I knew how to comfort you."

Lucy Tempest spoke with the most open simplicity, exactly as a sister might have done. But the one allusion grated on Lionel's heart.

CHAPTER XX.

DRY WORK.

CERTAINLY Lionel Verner's star was not in the ascendant—though Lucy Tempest had used the words in jest. His love had gone from him; his fortune and position were wrested from him; all had become the possession of one man, Frederick Massingbird. Serenely, to outward appearance, as Lionel had met the one blow, so did he now meet the other: and none, looking at his calm bearing, could suspect what the loss was to him. But it is the silent sorrow that eats into the heart; the loud grief does not tell upon it.

An official search was made; but no trace could be found of the missing codicil. Lionel had not expected that it would be found. He regarded it as a deed which had never had existence, and took up his abode with his mother. The village could not believe it; the neighbourhood resented it. People stood in groups to talk it over. It did certainly appear to be a most singular and almost incredible thing: that, in the enlightened days of the latter half of

the nineteenth century, an official deed should disappear out of a gentleman's desk, in his own well-guarded residence, his inhabited chamber. Thoughts and conjectures were freely bandied about; while Dr. West and Jan grew nearly tired of the particulars demanded of them in their professional visits, for their patients would talk of nothing else.

The first visible effect that the disappointment had was to stretch Lady Verner on a sick-bed. She fell into a low, nervous state of prostration, and her irritability—it must be confessed—was great. But for this illness, Lionel would have been away. Thrown now upon his own resources, he looked steadily into the future, and strove to mark out a career for himself; one by which—as he had said to Lucy Tempest—he might earn bread and cheese. Of course, at Lionel Verner's age, and trained to no profession, unfamiliar with habits of business, that was easier thought of than done. He had no particular talent for literature; he believed that, if he tried his hand at it, bread might come, but the cheese would be doubtful—although he saw men with even less aptitude for it than he, turning to it and embracing it with all the confidence in the world, as if it were an ever-open resource for all, when other trades failed. There were the three professions: but were they available? Lionel felt no inclination to become a working drudge like poor Jan; and the Church, for which he had not any liking, he was far too conscientious to embrace merely as a means of living. There remained the Bar; and to that he turned his attention, and resolved to qualify himself for it. That there would be grinding, and drudgery, and hard work, and no pay for years, he knew; but, so there might be, go to what he would. The Bar did hold out a chance of success, and there was nothing in it derogatory to the notions in which he had been reared—those of a gentleman.

Jan came to him one day about the time of the decision, and Lionel told him that he should soon be away; he intended to enter himself at the Middle Temple, and take chambers.

"Law!" said Jan. "Why, you'll be forty, maybe, before you ever get a brief. You should have entered earlier."

"Yes, but how was I to know that things would turn out like this?"

"Look here," said Jan, tilting himself very uncomfortably on the back of an armchair, "there's that five hundred pounds. You can have that."

"What five hundred pounds?" asked Lionel.

"The five hundred Uncle Stephen left me. I don't want it. Old West gives me as much as keeps me in clothes and that, which is all I care about. You take the money and use it."

"No, Jan. Thank you warmly, old boy, all the same; but I wouldn't take your little bit of money if I were starving."

"What's the good of it to me?" persisted Jan, swaying his legs about. "I can't use it: I have nothing to use it in. I have put it into the bank at Heartbury, but the bank may go smash, you know, and then who'd be the better for the money? Take it and make sure of it, Lionel."

Lionel smiled at him. Jan was as simple and single-hearted in his way as Lucy Tempest was in hers. But Lionel must want money very grievously indeed, before he would consent to take honest Jan's.

"I have five hundred of my own, you know, Jan," he said. "More than I can use yet awhile."

So he fixed upon the Bar, and would have hastened to London but for Lady Verner's illness. In the weak state to which disappointment and irritability had reduced her, she could not bear to lose sight of Lionel, or permit him to depart. "It will be time enough when I am dead; and that won't be long," was the constant burden of her song to him.

He believed his mother to be little more likely to die than he was, but he was too dutiful a son to thwart her in her present state. He gathered certain ponderous tomes about him, and began studying law on his own account, shutting himself up in his room all day to do it. Awfully dry work he found it; not in the least congenial; and many a time did he long to pitch the whole cargo into the pleasant stream that ran through the grounds of Sir Rufus Hautley, and which danced and glittered in the sunshine in view of Lionel's window.

He could not remain at his daily study without interruptions. They were pretty frequent. People,—tenants, workmen, and others,—would persist in coming for orders to Mr. Lionel. In vain Lionel told them that he could not give orders, could not interfere; he had no longer anything to do with Verner's Pride. They could not be brought to understand why he was not their master as usual—at any rate, why he could not so act, and interpose between them and the tyrant, Roy. In point of fact, Mr. Roy was head and master of the estate just now, and a nice head and master he made! Mrs. Verner, shut up in Verner's Pride with her ill-health, had no conception what games were being played. "Let be, let be," the people would say. "When Mr. Fred Massingbird comes home, Roy will be called to account, and receive his deserts:" a fond belief in which all did not join. Many entertained a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Fred Massingbird was too much inclined to tyranny on his own account, to disapprove the acts of Roy. Lionel's blood often boiled at what he saw and heard, and he wished he could put miles between himself and Deerham.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WHISPERED SUSPICION.

DR. WEST was crossing the courtyard one day, after paying his morning visit to Lady Verner, when he was waylaid by Lionel.

"How long will my mother remain in this weak state?" he inquired.

Dr. West lifted his arched eyebrows. "It is impossible to say, Mr. Lionel. These cases of low nervous fever are sometimes protracted."

"Lady Verner's is not nervous fever," dissented Lionel.

"It approaches very near to it."

"The fact is, I want to be away," said Lionel.

"There is no reason why you should not be away, if you wish it," rejoined the physician. "Lady Verner is not in any danger; she is sure to recover eventually. I should go, and say nothing to her beforehand," observed Dr. West. "When she found you were really off, and that there was no remedy for it, she must perforce reconcile herself to it. Lady Verner may be no better than she is now for weeks to come. Good day, Mr. Lionel."

Lionel entered the house with a slow step, and went up to his mother's chamber. She was lying on a couch by the fire, her eyes closed, her pale features contracted as with pain. Her maid Thérèse appeared to be busy with her, and Lionel called out Decima.

"There's no improvement, I hear, Decima."

"No. But, on the other hand, there is no danger. There's nothing even very serious, as I believe; only Dr. West has not the candour to say so. So long as he can keep her lying here, he will do it; she is a good patient for him. Poor mamma gives way, and he encourages her to do so. I wish she would discard him and trust to Jan."

"You don't like Dr. West, Decima?"

"I never did," said Decima. "And I believe that, in skill, Jan is quite equal to him. There's this much to be said of Jan: he is as sincere and open as if he were made of glass. Jan will never keep a patient in bed unnecessarily, or give the smallest dose more than is absolutely requisite. Did you hear of Sir Rufus Hautley sending for Jan?"

"No."

"He is ill, it seems. And when he sent to Dr. West's he expressly desired that it might be Mr. Jan Verner who answered the summons. Dr. West will not forgive that in a hurry."

"That comes of prejudice," said Lionel. "Since the reading of the will, Sir Rufus has been bitterly against the Massingbirds; and Dr. West, as connected with them, comes in for his share of the feeling. You are prejudiced against the Wests, Decima."

"And you in their favour," she could not help saying. "But I shall ever be thankful for one thing—that you have escaped Sibylla."

Was he thankful for it? Scarcely. While that pained heart of his, those coursing pulses, could beat on so tumultuously at the bare sound of her name.

In the silence that ensued—for neither felt inclined to break it—they heard a voice in the hall below, inquiring whether Mr. Verner was within. Lionel recognized it as Tynn's, and went down.

"My mistress has sent to ask if you'd be so kind as come to Verner's Pride, sir?" said Tynn, standing with his hat in his hand. "She bade me say that she did not feel well enough, or she'd have written you a note with the request, but she wishes particularly to see you."

"Does she wish to see me to-day?"

"As soon as ever you could get there, sir, I fancy. I am sure she meant to-day."

"Very well, Tynn. I'll come over. How is your mistress?"

"She's very well, sir, now; but she gets worried on all sides about things out-of-doors."

"Who worries her with those tales?" asked Lionel.

"Everybody almost that comes nigh her, sir. First it's one complaint that's brought to the house, of things going wrong, and then it's another complaint—and the women-servants have not the sense to keep it from her. My wife can't keep her tongue still, and can't see that the rest do. Might I ask how her ladyship is to-day, sir?"

"Not any better, Tynn. Tell Mrs. Verner I will be with her almost immediately."

Lionel lost no time in going to Verner's Pride. Turned from it as he had been, smarting under the injustice and the pain, many a one would have haughtily refused to re-enter it, whatever may have been the emergency. Not so, Lionel. He had chosen to quit Verner's Pride as his residence, but he had remained perfectly good friends with Mrs. Verner, calling on her occasionally. Not upon her would Lionel visit his displeasure.

It was somewhat curious that she had taken to sit in Stephen Verner's old study; a room she had rarely entered during his lifetime. Perhaps some vague impression that she was now a woman of business, or ought to be one, that she herself was in sole charge for the absent heir, had induced her to take up her daily abode amidst the drawers, bureaux, and other places which had con-

tained Mr. Verner's papers—which contained them still. She had, however, never yet looked at one of them. If anything came up to the house, leases, deeds, other papers, she would say: "Tynn, see to it," or "Tynn, take it over to Mr. Lionel Verner, and ask what's to be done." Lionel never refused to say.

She was sittting back in Mr. Verner's old chair, now, filling it a great deal better than he used to do. Lionel took her hand cordially. Every time he saw her he thought her looking larger and larger. However much she may have grieved at the time for her son John's death, it had not reduced either her size or her high colour. Nothing would have troubled Mrs. Verner permanently, unless it had been depriving her of her meals. Now John was gone, she cared for nothing else in life.

"It's kind of you to come, Lionel," said she. "I want to talk to you. You must take the management of the estate until Fred's at home again."

The words grated on his ear, and his brow knit itself into lines. But he answered calmly: "I cannot do that, Mrs. Verner."

"Then what can I do?" she asked. "Here's all this great estate, no one to see after it, no one to take it in charge! I'm sure I have no more right to be teased over it than you have, Lionel."

"It is your son's."

"I asked you not to leave Verner's Pride. I asked you to take the management of things out-of-doors! You did so, between your uncle's death and his burial."

"Believing that I was taking the management of what was mine," replied Lionel.

"Why do you visit upon me all that has happened?" pursued Mrs. Verner. "I declare that I knew nothing of what was done; I could not believe my own ears when I heard Matiss read out the will. You should not blame me."

"I never have blamed you for it, Mrs. Verner. I believe you to be as innocent of blame in the matter as I am."

"Then you ought not to turn cold and haughty, and refuse to help me. They are going to have me up before the courts at Heartbury!"

"Have you up before the courts at Heartbury!" repeated Lionel, in astonishment.

"It's all through Roy; I know it is. There's some stupid dispute about a lease, and I am to be had up in evidence. Did you hear of the threat?"

"What threat?" asked he.

"Some of the men are saying they'll burn down Verner's Pride. Roy turned them off the brickyard, and they threaten they'll do

it out of revenge. If you would just look to things, and keep Roy quiet, nothing of this would happen."

Lionel knew that.

"Mrs. Verner," he said, "were you the owner of Verner's Pride, I would spare no pains to help you. But I cannot act for Frederick Massingbird."

"What has Fred done to you?" she asked quickly.

"That is not the question—he has done nothing," answered Lionel, speaking still more rapidly. "My management would—if I know anything of him—be essentially different from your son's; different from what he would approve. Neither would I take authority upon myself only to have to resign it upon his return. Have Roy before you, Mrs. Verner, and caution him."

"It does no good. I have already had him. He smooths things over to me, so that black looks white. Lionel, I must say that you are unkind and obstinate."

"I do not think I am naturally either one or the other," he answered, smiling. "Perhaps it might answer your purpose to put things into the hands of Matiss, until your son's return."

"He won't take it," she answered. "I sent for him—what with this court business and the threat of incendiarism, I am as one upon thorns—and he said he would not undertake it. He seemed to fear contact with Roy."

"Were I to take the management, Mrs. Verner, my first act would be to discharge Roy."

Mrs. Verner tried again to shake his resolution. But he was quite firm. And, wishing her good day, he left Verner's Pride, and bent his steps towards the village.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PECKABYS.

In passing through Deerham from Verner's Pride, a little below Mrs. Duff's shop, you came to an opening on the left, which led to quite a swarm of cottages. Many of the labourers congregated here. If you took this turning, which was called Clay Lane, and continued your way past the cottages in a straight line over the fields, you would arrive at the residence of Broom the gamekeeper, leaving some brickfields to the right, and the Willow Pool, which had been the end of poor Rachel Frost, on the left.

A great part of the ill-feeling rife on the estate was connected with these brickfields. It was a great mistake on Mr. Verner's part ever to put Roy into power. Had he been in the habit of

going out of doors himself, he would have seen this, and not kept the man on a week. The former bailiff had died suddenly. He, the bailiff, had given some little power to Roy during his lifetime; had taken him on as a sort of inferior helper; and Mr. Verner, put to straits by the bailiff's death, had allowed Roy so to continue. Bit by bit, step by step, gradually, covertly, the man made good his footing: no other was put over his head: and in time he came to be called Roy the bailiff, without ever having been formally appointed. He drew his two pounds a week—his acknowledged wages—and he made it is hard to say what besides. Avarice and tyranny were the predominant passions of Roy's mind; bad qualities, and likely to bring forth bad fruits when joined to petty power.

About three years before Mr. Verner's death, a stranger had appeared in Clay Lane, and set up a shop there. Nearly every conceivable thing in the shape of eatables was sold in it; that is, such eatables as are in request amidst the poor. Bread, flour, meat, potatoes, butter, tea, sugar, red herrings, and the like. Soap and candles were also sold; and afterwards the man added green vegetables and coals, the latter doled out by the measure. The man's name was Peckaby. He and his wife were without family, and they managed the shop between them. A tall, strong, brawny man was he; his wife was a remarkably tall woman, fond of gossip and of smart caps. She would go gadding out for hours at a stretch, leaving him to get through the work at home, to prepare the meals, and serve the customers.

People fly to new things; to do so is inherent in human nature; and Mr. Peckaby's shop flourished. Not that he was much honoured with the complimentary title; his customers brought it out short—"Peckaby's shop." Much intimacy had appeared to exist from the first between him and Roy, so that it was surmised they had been previously acquainted. The prices were low, the shop was close at hand, and Clay Lane flocked to it.

New things, however, like new faces, are apt to turn out no better than the old: sometimes not as good. And thus it proved with Peckaby's shop. From rather underselling the other shops of the village, Peckaby's shop gradually came to increase its charges until they were higher than any one else's: the wares also deteriorated in value. Clay Lane awoke to this by degrees, and would have withdrawn its custom. But that was more easily contemplated than done. A good many families had been allowed to get on Peckaby's books, and they also found that Roy set his face against their leaving the shop. For Roy to resent a measure was a formidable affair, not readily contended with: the labourers did not dare to oppose him, lest he should make it an excuse to take their work from them. He had already discharged several. So Clay Lane, for the most part, found

itself bound to Peckaby, and to paying some thirty per cent. beyond what they would have paid at the old shops; added to which was the grievance of being compelled to put up with inferior articles. Dissatisfaction at this state of things had long been smouldering. It threatened to break out into open rebellion, perhaps bloodshed. The neighbourhood cried shame upon Roy, and felt inclined to echo the cry upon Mrs. Verner; whilst Clay Lane openly avowed its belief that Peckaby's shop was Roy's shop, and that the Peckabys were only put in to manage it.

One fearfully hot Monday morning, in the beginning of July, Lionel Verner was passing down Clay Lane. In another week he intended to be away from Deerham. Lady Verner's illness was drawing to an end. Jan, plain-speaking, truth-telling Jan, had at length quietly told his mother that there was nothing the matter with her but "vexation and temper." Lady Verner went into hysterics at Jan's unfilial conduct; but it was certain that, from this very time she began to amend.

Lionel was walking down Clay Lane. It was a short-cut to Lord Elmsley's house over the hills, a mile or two distant. A hotter day was never known in our climate; a more intensely burning sun never rode in the heavens. It blazed down with a force that was almost unbearable, scorching and withering all within its radius. Lionel looked up at it; it seemed to blister his face and dazzle his eyes; and his resolution wavered as he thought of the walk before him. "I have a great mind not to go," said he, mentally. "They can set up their targets without me. I shall be half dead by the time I get there." Nevertheless, in the indecision, he still walked on. He thought he'd see how affairs looked when he came to the green fields. Green! brown, rather.

But Lionel found other affairs to look at before he reached the fields. On turning a sharp angle in Clay Lane, he was surprised to see a crowd collected, stretching from one side of it to the other. Not a peaceable crowd evidently, although it was composed for the most part of the gentler sex; but a crowd of threatening arms and inflamed faces, and swaying white caps and noisy tongues. The female population of Clay Lane had assembled there.

Smash! went the breaking of glass in Lionel's ears as he came in view; smash! went another crash. Were Peckaby's shop windows suffering? A misgiving that it must be so crossed the mind of Lionel, and he made a few steps to the scene of warfare.

It was nothing less. Three great holes were staring in so many panes, the broken glass lying inside the shop window, amidst butter and flour, and other wares. The flour looked brown, and the butter was running to oil; but that was no reason why a shower of broken glass should be added to improve their excellence. Mr. Peckaby,

with white face and hair raised on end, stood the picture of terror, gazing at the damage, but too much afraid to start out and prevent it. Those big men are sometimes great physical cowards. Another pane smashed! the weapon used, a hard piece of flint coal, which just escaped Mr. Peckaby's head. Lionel thought it time to interfere. He made his way into the midst of them.

They drew aside when they saw who it was. In their passions—hot and angry then—perhaps no one, friend or enemy, would have stood a chance of being deferred to except Lionel Verner. They had so long looked upon him as the future lord of Verner's Pride that they forgot to look upon him as anything less now. And they all liked Lionel. His appearance was as oil poured upon troubled waters.

"What is the meaning of this? What is the matter?" demanded Lionel.

"Oh, sir, why don't you interfere to protect us, now things is come to this pass? You are a Verner!" was the prayer of remonstrance that met his words from all sides.

"Give me an explanation," reiterated Lionel. "What is your grievance?"

The particular grievance this morning, however easy to explain, was somewhat difficult to comprehend, when twenty tongues were speaking at once; and those, shrill and excited. In vain Lionel assured them that if one would tell it, instead of all, he should understand it sooner; that if their tones were subdued instead of loud enough to be heard in yonder brickfields, it might be desirable. Excited women, suffering under what they deem a wrong, cannot be made quiet: you may as well try to stem a rising flood. Lionel resigned himself to his fate, and listened: and at this stage of the affair a new feature struck his eye and surprised him. Scarcely one of the women but bore in her hand some uncooked meat. Such meat! Lionel drew himself and his coat from too close proximity to it.

From what Lionel could gather, it appeared that this meat had been purchased on Saturday night at Peckaby's shop. The women had said then, one and all, that it was not good; and Mr. Peckaby had been regaled with various open conjectures, more plain than polite, as to the state of the animal which had supplied it. Independently of the quality of the meat, it was none the better, even then, for having been kept. The women scented this; but Peckaby and Peckaby's wife, who was always in the shop with her husband on a Saturday night, protested and vowed that their customers were mistaken; the meat would be perfectly good and fresh on Sunday, and on Monday, too, if they liked to keep it so long. The women, somewhat doubtfully giving ear to the assurance, knowing that the

alternative was that, or none, bought the meat and took it home. On Sunday morning, they found the meat was—anything you may imagine. It was fit neither to be cooked nor eaten; and their anger against Peckaby was not diminished by a certain fact which oozed out to them; namely, that Peckaby himself did not cut *his* Sunday's dinner from the meat in his shop, but sent to buy it of one of the Deerham butchers. The general indignation was great; the men, deprived of their Sunday's dinner, joined in it; but nothing could be done until Monday morning. Peckaby's shop was always hermetically sealed on a Sunday. Mr. Verner would not have allowed Sunday traffic on the estate. Monday came. The men went to their work as usual, leaving their wives to deal with the matter. Behold them assembled before the shop of Peckaby. But of redress they could get none; Peckaby was deaf; and Lionel arrived to find hostilities commenced. Such was the summary of the story.

"You are acting very wrongly," were Lionel's first words to them in answer. "You should blame the meat, not Peckaby. Is this weather for keeping meat?"

"The weather didn't get to this heat till yesterday afternoon," said they—and Lionel could not deny the fact. Mrs. Dawson took up the word.

"*Our* meat wasn't bought at Peckaby's; our meat were got at Clark's, and it were sweet and good. Veal, too, the worst meat for keeping. Roy'd kill us if he could; but he can't force *us* on to Peckaby's rubbish. We defy him to 't."

In point of defying Roy, the Dawsons had done that long ago. There was open warfare between them, and occasional skirmishes took place. Roy's first act, after it was known that Lionel was disinherited, had been to discharge old Dawson and his sons from work. How they had managed to live since was a mystery: funds did not seem to run low with them: tales of night-poaching went about, and the sons got an odd job at legitimate work now and then.

"It's an awful shame," cried a civil, quiet woman, Sarah Grind, one of a numerous family, "that we should be beat down to have our victuals and other things at such a place as Peckaby's! Sometimes, sir, I'm almost inclined to ask, is it Christians as rules over us?"

Lionel felt the shaft levelled at his family, though not personally at himself.

"You are not beaten down to it," he said. "Why do you deal at Peckaby's? Stay a bit! I know what you would urge: that by going elsewhere you would displease Roy. It seems to me that if you would all go elsewhere, Roy *could* not prevent it. Should one of you attempt to go, he might do so; but he could not prevent it if you all go with one accord. If Peckaby's things are bad—as I believe they are—why do you buy them?"

"There ain't a single thing as is good in his place," spoke up a woman, half-crying. "Sir, it's truth. His flour is half bone-dust, his 'taturs is watery, his sugar is sand, and his tea is leaves dried over again."

"Allowing that it is so, it is no good reason for your smashing his windows," said Lionel. "It is utterly impossible that that can be tolerated."

"Why do he palm his bad things off upon us, then?" retorted the crowd. "He makes us pay half as much again as we do in the other shops; and when we gets 'em home, we can't eat 'em. Sir, you be Mr. Verner now; you ought to see as we be protected."

"I am Mr. Verner; but I have no power. My power has been taken from me, as you know. Mrs. Verner is——"

"A murrain upon her!" scowled a man from the outskirts of the crowd. "Why do she call *herself* Mrs. Verner, and stick herself up for missis at Verner's Pride, if she is to take no notice on us? Why do she leave us in the hands of Roy?"

Lionel was turning upon the man like lightning, when at the same moment he, Davies, had commenced to push his way towards Lionel. This caused the crowd to sway, and Lionel's hat, which he held carelessly in his hand, having taken it off to wipe his heated brow, was knocked down. Before he could stoop for it, it was trampled out of shape; not intentionally—they would have protected Lionel and all his with their lives—but inadvertently. A woman picked it up with a comical look of despair. To put *that* on again, was impossible.

"Never mind," said Lionel, good-naturedly. "It was my own fault; I should have held it better."

"Put your handkercher over your head, sir," was the woman's advice. "It will keep the sun off."

Lionel smiled, but did not take it. Davies was claiming his attention: while some of the women seemed inclined to go in for a fight, as to which should secure the hat.

"There'll be some dark deed done afore many weeks is gone over; that's what there'll be!" was Davies's sullen remark. "It ain't to be stood, sir, as a man and his family is to clam, because Peckaby——"

"Davies, I will hear no more on that score," interrupted Lionel. "You men should be men, and make common cause in that one point for yourselves, against Roy. You have your wages in your hand on a Saturday night, and can deal at any shop you please."

The man—he wore a battered old straw hat on his head, which looked as dirty as his face—raised his eyes with an air of surprise at Lionel.

"What wages, sir? We don't get ours."

"Not get your wages?" repeated Lionel.

"No, sir; not on a Saturday night. That's just it—it's where the new shoe's pinching. Roy don't pay now on a Saturday night. He gives us all a sort o' note, good for six shilling, and we has, us or our wives, to take that to Peckaby's, and get what we can for it. On the Monday, at twelve o'clock, his new time for paying the wages, he docks us of six shilling. *That's* his plan now. No wonder as some of us has kicked at it, and then he have turned us off. I be one."

Lionel's brow burnt; not with the blazing sun, but with indignation. That this should happen on the lands of the Verners! Hot words rose to his lips—to the effect that Roy, as he believed, was acting against the law—but he swallowed them down ere spoken. It might not be wise to proclaim so much to the men.

"Since when has Roy done this?" he asked. "I am surprised not to have heard of it."

"This six weeks he have done it, sir, and longer than that. It's get our things from Peckaby's, or it's not get any at all. Folks won't trust the likes of us, without we've the money in our hands. We might have knowed there was some evil in the wind when Peckaby's took to give us trust. Mr. Verner wasn't the best of masters to us, after he let Roy get power over us,—saving your presence for saying it, sir; but you must know as it's truth,—but there's things a-going on now as 'ud make him, if he knew 'em, rise out of his grave. Let Roy take care of hisself, that he don't get burned up some night in his bed!" significantly added the man.

"Be silent, Davies! You—— "

Lionel was interrupted by a commotion. Upon turning to ascertain its cause, he found an excited crowd hastening towards them from the brickfields. The news of the affray had been carried thither, and Roy, with much intemperate language and loud wrath, had set off at full speed to quell it. The labourers set off after him, probably to protect their wives. Shouting, hooting, swearing—at which pastime Roy was the loudest—on they came, in a state of fury.

But for the presence of Lionel Verner, things might have come to a crisis—if a fight could have brought it on. He interposed his authority, which even Roy did not yet dispute to his face, and he succeeded in restoring peace for the time. He became responsible—I don't know whether it was quite wise of him to do so—for the cost of the broken windows, and the women were allowed to go home unmolested. The men returned to their work, and Mr. Peckaby's face regained its colour. Roy was turning away, muttering to himself, when Lionel beckoned him aside with an authoritative hand.

"Roy, this must not go on. Do you understand me? It must not go on."

"What's not to go on, sir?" retorted Roy, sullenly.

"You know what I mean. This disgraceful system of affairs altogether. I believe that you would be amenable to the law in thus paying the men, or in part paying them, with an order for goods; instead of in open, honest coin. Unless I am mistaken, it borders very closely upon the truck system."

"I can take care of myself and of the law, too, sir," was Roy's answer.

"Very good. I shall take care that this sort of oppression is lifted from the shoulders of the men. Had I known it was being pursued, I should have stopped it before."

"You have no right to interfere between me and anything now, sir."

"Roy," said Lionel, calmly, "you are perfectly well aware that the right, not only to interfere between you and the estate, but to invest me with full power over it and you, was sought to be given me by Mrs. Verner at my uncle's death. For reasons of my own, I chose to decline it, and have continued to decline it. Do you remember what I once told you,—that one of my first acts of power would be to displace you? After what I have seen and heard to-day, I shall deliberate whether it is not my duty to reconsider my determination, and assume this, and all other power."

Roy's face turned green. He answered defiantly, not in tone, but in spirit:

"It wouldn't be for long, at any rate, sir; and Mr. Massingbird, I know, will put me into my place again on his return."

Lionel did not reply immediately. The sun was beating upon his uncovered head like a furnace, and he was casting a glance round to see if any friendly shade might be at hand. No, there was no shade just in that spot. A pump stood behind him, but the sun was nearly vertical, and the pump received as much of it as he did. A thought glanced through Lionel's mind of resorting to the advice of the women, to double his handkerchief over his head. But he did not purpose staying above another minute with Roy, to whom he again turned.

"Don't deceive yourself, Roy. Mr. Massingbird is not likely to countenance such doings as these. That Mrs. Verner will not, I know; and, I tell you plainly, I will not. You will pay the men's wages at the proper and usual time; you shall pay them in full, to the last halfpenny that they earn. Do you hear? I order you now to do so. We will have no underhand truck system introduced on the Verner estate."

"You'd like to ruin poor Peckaby, I suppose, sir!"

"I have nothing to do with Peckaby. If public rumour is to be credited, the business is not Peckaby's, but yours——"

"Them that says it is a pack of liars!" burst forth Roy.

"Possibly. I say I have nothing to do with that. Peckaby——"

Lionel's voice faltered. An awful pain—a pain, the like of which he had never felt—had seized him in the head. He put his hand up to it, and fell against the pump.

"Are you ill, sir?" asked Roy.

"What can it be?" murmured Lionel. "A sudden pain has attacked me, Roy," touching his head: "an awful pain. I'll go into Frost's, and sit down."

Frost's cottage was only a minute's walk, but Lionel staggered as he went to it. Roy attended him. The man humbly asked if Mr. Lionel would be pleased to lean upon him, but Lionel waved him off. Matthew Frost was sitting indoors alone: his grandchildren were at school, his son's wife was busy elsewhere. Matthew no longer went out to labour. He had been almost incapable of it before Mr. Verner's annuity fell to him. Robin was away at work: but Robin was a sadly altered man since the death of Rachel. His very nature appeared to have changed.

"My head! my head!" broke from Lionel, as he entered, in the intensity of his pain. "Matthew, I think I must have had a sun-stroke."

Old Matthew pulled off his straw hat, and lifted himself slowly out of his chair: all his movements were slow now. Lionel had sat himself down on the settle, his head clasped in both hands, his pale face turned red: as deep a crimson as Mrs. Verner's was habitually.

"A sun-stroke?" echoed old Matthew, leaning on his stick, as he stood before him, attentively regarding Lionel. "Ay, sir, for sure it looks like it. Have you been standing in the sun, this blazing day?"

"I have been standing in it without my hat," replied Lionel. "Not for long, however."

"It don't take a minute, sir, to do the mischief. I had one myself, years before you were born, Mr. Lionel. On a day as hot as this, I was out in my garden, here, at the back of this cottage. I had gone out without my hat, and was standing over my pig, watching him eat his wash, when I felt something take my head—such a pain, sir, that I had never felt before, and never wish to feel again. I went indoors, and Robin, who might be a boy of five or so, looked frightened, my face was so red. I couldn't hold my head up, sir; and when the doctor came, he said it was a sun-stroke. I think there must be particular moments and days when the sun has this power to harm us, though we don't know which they are, nor how to avoid them," added old Matthew, as much in soliloquy

as to Lionel. "I had often been out before, without my hat, in as great heat; for longer, too: and it had never harmed me. Since then, sir, I have put a white handkerchief inside the crown of my hat in hot weather: the doctor told me to do so."

"How long did the pain last?" asked Lionel, feeling *his* pain growing worse with every moment. "Many hours?"

"*Hours?*" repeated old Matthew, with a strong emphasis on the word. "Mr. Lionel, it lasted for days and weeks. Before the next morning came, sir, I was in a raging fever; for three weeks, good, I was in my bed, above here, and never out of it; hardly the clothes smoothed atop of me. Sun-strokes are not very frequent in this climate, sir, but when they do come, they can't be trifled with."

Perhaps Lionel felt the same conviction. Perhaps he felt that with this pain, increasing as it was in intensity, he must make the best of his way home, if he would get home at all. "Good day, Matthew," he said, rising from the bench. "I'll go home at once."

"And send for Dr. West, sir, or for Mr. Jan, if you are no better when you get there," was the old man's parting salutation.

He stood at the door, leaning on his stick, and watched Lionel down Clay Lane. "A sun-stroke, for sure," repeated he, slowly turning in, as the angle in the lane took Lionel from his view.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DAYS AND NIGHTS OF PAIN.

In his darkened chamber at Deerham Court, lay Lionel Verner. Whether it was sun-stroke, or whether it was but the commencement of a fever, which had suddenly struck him down that day, certain it was, that a violent sickness attacked him, and he lay for many, many days—days and weeks, as old Frost had called it—between life and death. Fever and delirium struggled with life, which should obtain the mastery.

Very little doubt was there, that his state of mind increased his physical danger. How bravely Lionel had struggled to do battle with his great anguish, he might scarcely have known himself, in all its full intensity, except for this illness. He had loved Sibylla with the pure fervour of feelings young and fresh. He could have loved her to the end of life; he could have died for her. No leaven was mixed with his love; no dross; it was refined as pure silver. It is only these exalted, ideal passions, which partake more of heaven's nature than of earth's, that *tell* upon the heart when their end comes. Terribly had it told upon Lionel Verner's. In one

hour he had learnt that Sibylla was false to him, was about to become the wife of another. In his reticence, his sensitive pride, he had put a smiling face upon it before the world. He had watched her marry Frederick Massingbird, and had "made no sign." Deep, deep in his heart he had pressed down his misery, passing his days in what may be called a false atmosphere—showing a false side to his friends. It seemed false to Lionel, this appearing to be what he was not. He was his true self at night only, when he could turn, and toss, and groan out his trouble at will. But, when illness attacked him, and he had no strength of body to throw off his mental pain, then he found how completely the blow had shattered him. It seemed to Lionel, in his sane moments, in the intervals of his delirium, that it would be far happier to die than to wake up again to renewed life, to bear about within him that ever-present sorrow. Whether the fever—it was not brain fever, though bordering closely upon it—was the result of this state of mind, more than of the sun-stroke, might be a question. No one knew anything of that inward state, and the sun-stroke had all the blame—except, perhaps, from Lionel himself. He may have doubted.

One day Jan called in to see him. It was in August. Several weeks had elapsed since the commencement of his illness, and he was so far recovered as to be removed by day to a sitting-room on a level with his chamber. A wondrously pretty sitting-room over Lady Verner's drawing-room, but not so large as that, and called "Miss Decima's room." The walls were panelled in medallions, white and delicate blue, the curtains were of blue satin and lace, the furniture was blue. In each medallion hung an exquisite painting in water-colours, framed—Decima's doing. Lady Verner was one who liked at times to be alone, and then Decima would sit in this room, and feel more at home than in any room in the house. When Lionel began to recover, the room was given up to him. Here he lay on the sofa; or lounged in an easy-chair; or stood at the window, his hands clasping some support, his legs tottering as were poor old Matthew Frost's. Sometimes Lady Verner would be his companion, sometimes he would be consigned to Decima and Lucy Tempest. Lucy was pleased to take her share of helping the time to pass; would read to him, or talk to him; or, sitting on her low stool on the hearthrug, would only look at him, waiting until he should want something done. Dangerous moments, Miss Lucy! Unless your heart shall be cased in adamant, you can scarcely be with that attractive man—ten times more attractive now, in his sickness—and not get your wings singed.

Jan came in one day when Lionel was sitting on the sofa, having propped the cushion up at the back of his head. Decima was winding some silk, and Lucy was holding the skein for her. Lucy

wore a summer dress of white muslin, a blue sprig raised upon it in tambour stitch, with blue and white ribbons at its waist and neck. Very pretty, very simple it looked, but in wonderful accordance with Lucy Tempest. Jan looked round, saw a tolerably strong table, and took up his seat upon it.

"How d'ye get on, Lionel?" asked he.

It was Dr. West who attended Lionel, and Jan was strictly averse to interfering with the doctor's patients—or, rather, the doctor was strictly averse to his doing so—therefore Jan's visits were quite unprofessional.

"I don't get on at all—as it seems to me," replied Lionel. "I'm sure I am weaker than I was a week ago."

"I dare say," said Jan.

"You dare say!" echoed Lionel. "When a man has turned the point of an illness, he expects to get stronger, instead of weaker."

"That depends," said Jan. "I beg your pardon, Miss Lucy: my foot has caught in your dress, I think."

Lucy turned to disentangle her dress from Jan's great foot. "You should not sway your feet about so, Jan," said she, pleasantly.

"It hasn't hurt the dress, has it?" asked Jan.

"Oh no. Is there another skein to hold, Decima?"

Decima replied in the negative. She rose, put the paper of silk upon the table, and then turned to Jan.

"I and mamma had quite a contention yesterday," she said to him. "I say that Lionel is not being treated properly."

"That's just my opinion," laconically replied Jan. "Only West flares up so, if his treatment is called into question. I'd get him well in half the time."

Lionel wearily changed his position on the sofa. Getting well, or keeping ill, did not appear to interest him greatly.

"Let's look at his medicine, Decima," continued Jan. "I have not seen what has come round lately."

Decima left the room and brought back a bottle with some medicine in it. "There's only one dose left," she remarked to Jan.

Jan took the cork out and smelt it; then he tasted it, apparently with great gusto, as any one else might taste port wine; whilst Lucy watched him, drawing her lips away from her pretty teeth in distaste at the proceeding.

"Psha!" cried Jan.

"Is it not proper medicine for him?" asked Decima.

"It's as innocent as water," said Jan. "It will do him neither good nor harm."

And finally Jan poured the lot down his own throat.

Lucy shuddered.

"Oh, Jan, how could you take it?"

"It won't hurt me," said Jan. "Lionel, I'll bring you round some better stuff than this. What are you eating?"

"Nothing," said Decima. "Dr. West keeps him upon arrow-root and beef-tea, and that sort of thing."

"Slops," said Jan, contemptuously. "Have a fowl cooked every day, Lionel, and eat it if you like, bones and all; or a mutton-chop or two; or some good eels. And have the window open and sit at it; don't lounge on that sofa, fancying you can't leave it; and to-morrow or the next day, borrow Mrs. Verner's carriage——"

"No, thank you," interposed Lionel.

"Have a fly, then," composedly went on Jan. "Rouse yourself, and eat and drink, and go into the air, and you'll soon be as well as I am. It's stewing and fretting indoors, fancying themselves ill, that keeps folks back."

Something like a sickly smile crossed Lionel's wan lips. "Do you remember how you offended your mother, Jan, by telling her she only wanted to rouse herself?"

"Well," said Jan, "it was the truth. West keeps his patients dilly-dallying on, when he might have them well in no time. If he says anything about them to me, I always tell him so; otherwise I don't interfere; it's no business of mine. But you are my brother, you know."

"Don't quarrel with West on my account, Jan. Only settle it amicably between you, what I am to do, and what I am to take. I don't care."

"Quarrel!" said Jan. "You never knew me quarrel in your life. West can come and see you as usual, and charge you, if you please; and you can just pour his physic down the sink. I'll send you some bark: but it's not of much consequence whether you take it or not; it's good kitchen physic you want now. Is there anything on your mind that's keeping you back?" added plain-speaking Jan.

A streak of scarlet rose to Lionel's white cheek.

"Anything on my mind, Jan? I do not understand you."

"Look here," said Jan. "If there is nothing, you ought to be better than this by now, in spite of old West. What you have to do is to rouse yourself, and believe you are well, instead of lying up, here. My mother was angry with me for telling her the same, but didn't she get well all one way after it? Look at the poor! They have their illnesses that bring 'em down to skeletons; but when did you ever find them lie up, after they got better! They can't; they are obliged to go out and turn-to again; and the consequence is they are well in no time. You have your fowl to-day," continued Jan, taking himself off the table to depart; "or a duck, if you fancy it more; and if West comes in while you are eating it, tell him I ordered it. He can't grumble at me for doctoring *you*."

Decima left the room with Jan. Lucy Tempest went to the window, threw it open, drew an easy-chair with its cushions near to it, and then returned to the sofa.

"Will you come to the window?" said she to Lionel. "Jan said you were to sit there, and I have put your chair ready."

Lionel unclosed his eyelids. "I am better here, child, thank you."

"But you heard what Jan said—that you were not going the right way to get well."

"It does not much matter, Lucy, whether I get well, or whether I don't," he answered wearily.

Lucy sat down; not on her favourite stool, but on a low chair, and fixed her eyes upon him gravely.

"Do you know what Mr. Cust would say to that?" she asked. "He would tell you that you were ungrateful to God. You are already half-way towards getting well."

"I know I am, Lucy. But I am tired of life."

"It is only the very old who say that, or ought to say it. I am not sure that they *ought*—even if they were a hundred. But you are young. Stay! I will find it for you."

He was searching for his handkerchief. Lucy found it on the floor at the back of the sofa. She brought it round to him, and he gently retained her hand as he took it.

"My little friend, you have yet to learn that *things*, not years, tire us of life."

Lucy shook her head.

"No; I have not to learn it. I know it must be so. Will you *please* come to the window?"

Lionel, partly because his tormentor—(may the word be used? he was ill, bodily and mentally, and would have lain still for ever) —was a young lady, partly to avoid the trouble of persisting in "No," rose, and took his seat in the arm-chair.

"What an obstinate nurse you would make, Lucy! Is there anything else, pray, that you wish me to do?"

She did not smile in response to his smile; she looked very grave and serious.

"I would do all that Jan says, were I you," was her answer. "I believe in Jan. He will get you well sooner than Dr. West."

"Believe in Jan?" repeated Lionel, willing to be gay if he could. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have faith in Jan. I have none in Dr. West."

"In his skill? Let me tell you, Lucy, he is a very clever man, in spite of what Jan may say."

"I can't tell anything about his skill. Until Jan spoke now I did not know but he was treating you rightly. But I have no faith in

himself. I think a good, true man should be depended on to cure, more certainly than one who is false-hearted."

"False-hearted!" echoed Lionel. "Lucy, you should not so speak of Dr. West. You know nothing wrong of Dr. West. He is much esteemed among us at Deerham."

"Of course I know nothing wrong of him," returned Lucy, with some slight surprise. "But when I look at people I always seem to know what they are. I am sorry to have said so much. I—I think I forgot it was to you I spoke."

"Forgot!" exclaimed Lionel. "Forgot what?"

She hesitated at the last sentence, and she now blushed vividly.

"I forgot for the moment that he was Sibylla's father," she simply said.

Again the scarlet rose to the face of Lionel. Lucy leaned against the window-frame only a few paces from him, her large soft eyes, in their earnest sympathy, lifted to his. He positively shrank from them.

"What's Sibylla to me?" he asked. "She is Mrs. Frederick Massingbird."

Lucy stood in penitence. "Do not be angry with me," she timidly cried. "I ought not to have said it to you, perhaps. I see it always."

"See what, Lucy?" he continued, speaking gently, not in anger.

"I see how much you think of her, and how ill it makes you. When Jan asked just now if you had anything on your mind to keep you back, I knew what it was."

Lionel grew hot and cold with a sudden fear. "Did I say anything in my delirium?"

"Nothing at all—that I heard of. I was not with you. I do not think any one suspects that you are ill because—because of *her*."

"Ill because of her!" he sharply repeated; the words breaking from him in his agony, in his dread at finding so much suspected. "I am ill from fever. What else should I be ill from?"

Lucy went up to his chair and stood before him meekly.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "I cannot help seeing things, but I did not mean to make you angry."

He rose, steadying himself by the table, and laid his hand upon her head, with the same fond motion that a father might have used.

"Lucy, I am not angry. Only vexed at being watched so closely," he concluded, his lips parting with a faint smile. In her earnest, truthful, serious face of concern, as it was turned up to him, he read how futile it would be to persist in his denial.

"I did not watch you for the purpose of watching. I saw how it was, without being able to help myself."

Lionel bent his head.

"Let the secret remain between us, Lucy. Never suffer a hint of it to escape your lips."

Nothing answered him but the glad expression that beamed from her countenance, telling him how implicitly he might trust to her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DANGEROUS COMPANIONSHIP.

LIONEL VERNER grew better. His naturally good constitution triumphed over disease, and his soreness of mind lost something of its sharpness. So long as he brooded in silence over his pain and his wrongs, there was little chance of the sting becoming much lighter; it was as the vulture preying upon its own vitals; but that season of silence was past. When once a deep grief can be *spoken of*, its great agony is gone. I think there is an old saying, or a proverb—"Griefs lose themselves in telling," and a greater truth was never uttered. The ice once broken, touching his feelings with regard to Sibylla, Lionel found comfort in making it his theme of conversation, although his hearer and confidant was only Lucy Tempest. A strange comfort, yet natural; as those who have suffered as Lionel suffered may be able to testify. At the time of the blow, when Sibylla deserted him with coolness so great, Lionel could have died rather than give utterance to a syllable betraying his own pain; but several months had elapsed since then, and the turning-point had come. He did not, unfortunately, love Sibylla one shade less; love such as his cannot be overcome so lightly; but the keenness of the disappointment, the blow to his self-esteem—to his vanity, it may be said—was growing less intense. In a case of faithlessness, such as this, let it happen to man or woman, the wounded self-esteem is not the least evil that must be borne. Lucy Tempest was, in Lionel's estimation, little more than a child, yet it was singular how he grew to love to talk to her. Not for love of *her*—do not fancy that—but for the opportunity it gave him of talking of Sibylla. You may deem this an anomaly; I know that it was natural; and, as oil poured upon a wound, so did it bring balm to Lionel's troubled spirit.

He never spoke of her except at the twilight hour. During the broad, garish light of day his lips were sealed. In the soft twilight of the evening, if it happened that Lucy was alone with him, then he would pour out his heart, would tell of his past tribulation. As *past* he spoke of it; had he not regarded it as past, he never would

have spoken. Lucy listened, chiefly in silence, returning him her earnest sympathy. Had Lucy Tempest been a little older in ideas, or had she been by nature and training less utterly single-minded, she might not have sat unrestrainedly with him, going into the room at any moment, and remaining there, as she would had he been her brother. Lucy was growing to covet the companionship of Lionel very much—too much, taking all things into consideration. It never occurred to her that, for that very reason, she might do well to keep away from it. She was not sufficiently experienced to define her own sensations; and she did not surmise that there was any thing inexpedient or not perfectly orthodox in her being so much with Lionel. She liked to be with him, and she freely indulged the liking upon any occasion that offered itself.

"Oh, Lucy, I loved her! I loved her!" he would say, having repeated the same words perhaps fifty times before in other interviews; and he would lean back in his easy-chair, and cover his eyes with his hand, as if willing to shut out all sight except that of the past. "Heaven knows what she was to me; Heaven only knows what her faithlessness has cost me!"

"Did you dream of her last night, Lionel?" answered Lucy, from her low seat where she generally sat, near to Lionel, but with her face generally turned from him.

And it may as well be mentioned that Miss Lucy never thought of such a thing as *discouraging* Lionel's love and remembrance of Sibylla. Her whole business in the matter seemed to be to listen to him, and help him to remember her.

"Ay," said Lionel, in answer to the question. "Do you suppose I should dream of anything else?"

Whatever Lucy may or may not have supposed, it was a positive fact, known well to Lionel—known to him, and remembered by him to this hour—that he constantly dreamt of Sibylla. Night after night, since the unhappy time when he learnt that she had left him for Frederick Massingbird, had she formed the prominent subject of his dreams. It is the strict truth: and it will prove to you how powerful a hold she must have possessed over his imagination. This he had not failed to make an item in his revelations to Lucy.

"What was your dream last night, Lionel?"

"It was very confused: or seemed to be so when I awoke. It was full of trouble. Sibylla appeared to have done something wrong, and I was defending her, and she was angry with me for it. Unusually confused it was. Generally my dreams are too clear and vivid."

"I wonder how long you will dream of her, Lionel? For a year, do you think?"

"I hope not," heartily responded Lionel. "Lucy, I wish I could forget her."

"I wish you could—if you do wish to do it," simply replied Lucy.

"Wish! I wish I could have swallowed a draught of old Lethe's stream last February, and never recalled her again!"

He spoke vehemently: and yet there was a little undercurrent of suppressed consciousness deep down in his heart, whispering that his greatest solace was to remember her, and to talk of her as he was doing now. To talk of her as he would to his own soul: and that he had now learnt to do with Lucy Tempest. Not to any one else in the whole world could Lionel have breathed the name of Sibylla.

"Do you suppose she will soon be coming home?" asked Lucy, after a silence.

"Of course she will. The news of his inheritance went out shortly after they started, and must have reached Melbourne nearly as soon as they did. There's little doubt but they are on their road home now. Massingbird would not care to stop to look after what was left by John, when he knows himself to be owner of Verner's Pride."

"I wish Verner's Pride had not been left to Frederick Massingbird!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Frankly speaking, so do I," confessed Lionel. "It ought to be mine by every right. And, putting myself quite out of consideration, I judge Frederick Massingbird unworthy to be its master. That's between ourselves, mind Lucy."

"It is all between ourselves," returned Lucy.

"Ay. What should I have done without you, my dear little friend?"

"I am glad you have not had to do without me," simply answered Lucy. "I hope you will let me be your friend always!"

"That I will. Now Sibylla's gone, there's no one in the whole world I care for, but you."

He spoke it without any hidden meaning: he might have used the same words, been actuated precisely by the same feelings, to his mother or his sister. His all-absorbing love for Sibylla as yet barred even the idea of any other love to his mind.

"Lionel!" cried Lucy, turning her face full upon him in her earnestness: "*how* could she choose Frederick Massingbird, when she might have chosen you?"

"Tastes differ," said Lionel, speaking lightly, a thing he rarely did with Lucy. "There's no accounting for them. Some time or other, Lucy, you may be marrying an ugly fellow with a wooden leg and a red beard; and people will say, 'How could Lucy Tempest have chosen him?'"

Lucy coloured. "I do not like you to speak in that joking way, if you please," she gravely said.

"Heigh-ho, Lucy!" sighed he. "Sometimes I fancy a joke may cheat me out of a minute's care. I wish I was well, and away from this place. In London I shall have my hands full, and can rub off the rust of old grievances with hard work."

"You will not like London better than Deerham."

"I shall like it ten thousand times better," impulsively answered Lionel. "I have no longer a place in Deerham, Lucy. That is gone."

"You allude to Verner's Pride?"

"Everything's gone that I valued in Deerham," cried Lionel, with the same impulse—"Verner's Pride amongst the rest. I would never stop here to see the ruling of Fred Massingbird. Better that John had lived to take it, than that it had come to him."

"Was John better than his brother?"

"He would have made a better master. He was, I believe, a better man. Not but that John had his faults. As we all have."

"All!" echoed Lucy. "What are your faults?"

Lionel could not help laughing. She asked the question, as she did all her questions, in the most genuine, earnest manner: really seeking for information. "I think for some time back, Lucy, my chief fault has been grumbling. I am sure you must find it so. Better days may be in store for both of us. You have borne with me bravely, Lucy. God bless you, my dear child."

She neither went away, nor drew her hand away, which he had taken. She stood there patiently, until he should release it. He soon did so, with a weary movement: all he did was wearisome to him then, except thinking and talking of the theme which ought to have been a forbidden one—Sibylla.

"Will you come down to tea this evening?" asked Lucy.

"I don't care for tea; I would rather be alone."

"Then I will bring you some up."

"No, no; you shall not have that trouble. I will come down, then, presently."

Lucy Tempest disappeared. Lionel leaned against the window, looking out on the night landscape, and lost himself in thoughts of his faithless love. He roused himself from them with a stamp of impatience.

"I must shake it off," he cried to himself; "I *will* shake it off. None, save myself or a fool, but would have done it months ago. And yet, Heaven alone knows how I have tried and battled, and how vain the battle has been!"

CHAPTER XXV.

HOME TRUTHS FOR LIONEL.

THE cottages down Clay Lane were ill-drained. It might be nearer the truth to say that they were not drained at all. As is the case with many another fine estate beside Verner's Pride, while the agricultural land was well drained, no expense spared upon it, the poor dwellings had been neglected. Not only in the matter of draining, but in other respects, were these habitations deficient: but that strong terms sometimes grate unpleasantly upon the ear, one might say shamefully deficient. The consequence was, that no autumn ever went over, scarcely any springtide, but some one would be down with ague, or low fever; and it was reckoned a fortunate season if a good many were not prostrate with illness.

The first time that Lionel Verner took a walk down Clay Lane after his illness was a fine day in October. He had been out before in other directions, but not in that of Clay Lane. He had not yet recovered his full strength; he looked ill and emaciated. Had he been strong, he would not have found himself nearly losing his equilibrium at being violently jostled by a woman, who turned swiftly out of her own door.

"Take care, Mrs. Grind! Is your house on fire?"

"It's begging a thousand pardons, sir! I hadn't no idea you was there," returned Mrs. Grind, in lamentable confusion, when she saw whom she had all but knocked down. "Grind, he catches sight o' one o' the brick men going by, and he tells me to run and fetch him in; but I had my hands in the soap-suds, and couldn't take 'em out of it at the minute, and I was hasting lest he'd gone too far to be caught up."

"Is Grind better?"

"He ain't no worse, sir. There he is," she added, throwing the door open.

On the side of the kitchen, opposite the door, was a pallet-bed stretched against the wall, and on it lay the woman's husband, Grind, dressed. It was a small room, and it appeared literally full of children, of encumbrances of all sorts. A string extended from one side of the fireplace to the other, and on this hung some wet coloured pinafores, the steam ascending from them in clouds. The children were in various stages of *un*dress, these coloured pinafores doubtlessly constituting their sole outer garment. But that Grind's eye had caught his, Lionel might have hesitated to enter so uncomfortable a place. His natural kindness of heart—nay, his innate

regard for the feelings of others, however inferior in station—prevented his turning back when the man had seen him.

"Grind, don't move, don't get off the bed," Lionel said hastily. But Grind was already up. A fit of ague was upon him then, and he shook the bed as he sat down upon it. His face wore that blue appearance, which you may have seen in agueish patients.

"You don't seem much better, Grind."

"Thank ye, sir, I'm baddish just now again, but I'm no worse on the whole," was the man's reply. A civil, quiet, hard-working man as any on the estate; nothing against him but his flock of children, and his difficulty in getting along any way. The mouths to feed were many—ravenous young mouths, too; and the wife, though anxious and well-meaning, was not the most thrifty woman in the world. She liked gossiping better than thrift; but gossip was the most prevalent complaint in Clay Lane, so far as its female population was concerned.

"How long have you been ill?" asked Lionel, leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece, and looking down on Grind, Mrs. Grind having smuggled away the pinafores.

"It's going along of four weeks, sir, now. It's an illness, sir, I takes it, as must have its course."

"All illnesses must have that, I believe," said Lionel. "Mine has taken its own time pretty well, has it not?"

Grind shook his head. "You don't look none the better for your bout, sir. And it's a long time you must have been, getting strong. Mr. Jan said just a month ago, when he first come to see me, as you was well, so to say, then. Ah! it's only them as have tried it knows what the pulling through up to strength again is, when the illness itself seems gone."

Lionel's conscience was rather suggestive at that moment. He might have been stronger than he was, by this time, had he "pulled through" with a better will, and given way less. "I am sorry not to see you better, Grind," he said kindly.

"You see me at the worst, sir, to-day," said the man, in a tone of apology, as if seeking to excuse his own illness. "I *be* getting better, and that's a thing to be thankful for. I only gets the fever once in three days now. Yesterday, sir, I got down to the field, and earned what'll come to eighteenpence. I did indeed, sir, though you'd not think it, looking at me to-day."

"Do you mean to say you went to work in your present state?" asked Lionel.

"I didn't seem a bit ill yesterday, sir, except for the weakness. The fever keeps me down all one day, as may be to-day; then the morrow I'm quite prostrate with the weakness it leaves: and the third day I'm, so to speak, well. But I can't do a full day's work,

sir; no, nor hardly half a one, and by evening I be so done over I can scarce crawl to my place here. It ain't much, sir, part of a day's work in three; but I'm thankful for that improvement. A week ago, I couldn't do as much as that."

More suggestive thoughts for Lionel.

"He'd get better quicker, sir, if he could do his work regular," put in the woman. "What's one day's work out o' three—even if 'twas a full day's—to find us all in victuals? In course he can't fare better nor we; and Peckabys, they don't give much trust to us. He gets a basin o' gruel, or a saucer o' porridge, or a hunch o' bread with a mite o' cheese."

Lionel looked at the man. "You cannot eat plain bread now, can you, Grind?"

"All this day, sir, I shan't eat nothing; I couldn't swallow it," he answered. "After the fever and the ague 's gone, then I could eat, but not bread; it seems too dry for the throat, and it sticks in it. I get a dish o' tea, or something in that way. The next day—my well day, I calls it—I can eat all before me."

"You ought to have more strengthening food."

"It's not for us to say, sir, as we ought to have this food, or that food, unless we earns it," replied Grind, in a meek spirit of resignation that many a rich man might have taken pattern by. "Mr. Jan, he says, 'Grind, you should have some meat, and some good beef-tea, and a drop o' wine would do you no harm,' says he. And it makes me smile, sir, to think where the like o' us poor folks is to get such things. Lucky to be able to get a bit o' bread and a drop o' tea, them as is off their work, just to rub on and keep theirselves out o' the workhouse. I know I'm thankful to do it. Jim has got a place, sir."

"Jim, which is Jim?" asked Lionel, turning his eyes on the group of children, supposing one of them must be meant.

"He ain't here, sir," cried the woman. "It's the one with the black hair, and he was six year old yesterday. He's gone to Farmer Johnson's to take care o' the pigs in the field. He's to get a shilling a week."

Lionel moved from his position. "Grind," he said, "don't you think it would be better if you gave yourself complete rest, not attempting to go out to work until you are stronger?"

"I couldn't afford it, sir. And as to it's being better for me, I don't see that. If I can work, sir, I'm better at work. I know it tires me, but I believe I get stronger the sooner for it. Mr. Jan, he says to me, 'Don't lie by never, Grind, unless you're obliged to it: it only rusts the limbs.' And he ain't far out, sir. Folks gets more harm from idleness than they do from work."

"Well, good day, Grind," said Lionel, "and I heartily hope

you'll soon be on your legs again. Lady Verner shall send you something more nourishing than bread, while you are still suffering."

"Thank ye kindly, sir," replied Grind. "My humble duty to my lady."

Lionel went out. "What a lesson for me!" he involuntarily exclaimed. "This poor half-starved man struggling patiently onward through his sickness; while I, who had every luxury about me, spent my time in repining. What a lesson! Heaven help me to take it to heart!"

He lifted his hat as he spoke, his feeling at the moment full of reverence; and went on to Frost's. "Where's Robin?" he asked of the wife.

"He's in the back-room, sir," was the answer. "He's getting better fast. The old father have gone out a bit, warming himself in the sun."

She opened the door of a small back-room as she spoke. But it proved to be empty. Robin was discerned in the garden, sitting on a bench: possibly to give *himself* a warming in the sun—as Mrs. Frost expressed it. He sat in a quiet attitude: his arms, folded, his head bowed. Since the miserable occurrence touching Rachel, Robin Frost was a fearfully changed man: never, from the hour that the coroner's inquest was held and certain evidence had come out, had he been seen to smile. He had now been ill with ague, just as Grind had been. Hearing the approach of footsteps, he turned his head, and rose when he saw it was Lionel.

"Well, Robin, how fares it? You are better, I hear. Sit yourself down: you are not strong enough to stand. What an enemy this low fever is! I wish we could root it out!"

"Many might be all the healthier for it, sir, if it could be done," was Robin's answer, spoken indifferently—as he nearly always spoke now. "As for me, I'm not far off being well again."

"They said in the village you were going to die, Robin, did they not?" continued Lionel. "You have cheated them, you see."

"They said it, some of 'em, sir, and thought it, too. Old father thought it. I'm not sure but Mr. Jan thought it. *I* didn't, bad as I was," continued Robin, in a significant tone. "I had my oath to keep."

"Robin!"

"Sir, I have sworn—and you know I have sworn it—to have my revenge upon him that worked ill to Rachel. I can't die till that oath has been kept."

"There's a certain sentence, Robin, given us for our guidance, which runs somewhat after this fashion: 'Vengeance is mine,'" quietly spoke Lionel. "Have you forgotten who it is says that?"

"Why did he—the villain—forget them sentences? Why did he forget 'em and harm her?" retorted Robin. "Sir, it's of no good for you to look at me in that way. I'll never be baulked in this matter. Old father, now and again, *he'll* talk about forgiveness: and when I say, 'Weren't you her father?' 'Ay,' he'll answer, 'but I've got one foot in the grave, Robin, and anger will not bring her back to life.' No, it won't," doggedly went on Robin. "It won't undo what was done, neither; but I'll keep my oath—so far as it is in my power to keep it. Dead though he is, he shall be exposed to the world."

The words "dead though he is" aroused the attention of Lionel. "To whom do you allude, Robin?" he asked. "Have you obtained any fresh clue?"

"Not much of one," answered the man, with a stress upon the word "fresh." "I have had it this six or seven months. When they heard he was dead, then they could speak out and tell me their suspicions of him."

"Who could? What mystery are you talking?" reiterated Lionel.

"Never mind who, sir. It was one that kept the mouth shut, as long as there was any good in opening it. 'Not to make ill-blood,' was the excuse given to me after. If I had but knowed at the time!" added the man, clenching his fist, "I'd have went out and killed him, if he had been double as far off!"

"Robin, what have you heard?"

"Well, sir, I'll tell *you*. But I have not opened my lips to a living soul, not even to old father. The villain that did the harm to Rachel was John Massingbird!"

Lionel remained silent from surprise.

"I don't believe it," he presently said, speaking emphatically. "Who has accused him?"

"Sir, I have said that I can't tell you. I passed my word not to do it. It was one that had cause to suspect him at the time. And it was never told me—*never told me*—until John Massingbird was dead!"

Robin's voice rose to a sound of pain, and he raised his hands with a gesture of despair.

"Did your informant *know* that it was John Massingbird?" Lionel gravely asked.

"They had not got what is called positive proof, such as might avail in a court of justice; but they were morally certain," replied Robin. "And so am I. I am only waiting for one thing, sir, to tell it out to all the world."

"And what's that?"

"The return of Luke Roy. There's not much doubt that he knows all about it; I have my reasons for saying so, and I'd like to

be quite sure before I tell out the tale. Old Roy says Luke may be expected home by any ship as comes: he don't think he'll stop there, now John Massingbird's dead."

"Then, Robin, listen to me," returned Lionel. "I have no positive proof, any more than it appears your informant has: but I am perfectly convinced in my own mind that the guilty man was *not* John Massingbird, but another. Understand me," he emphatically continued, "I have good and sufficient reason for saying this. Rely upon it, whoever it may have been, John Massingbird it was not."

Robin lifted his eyes to the face of Lionel.

"You say you don't know this, sir?"

"Not of actual proof. But so sure am I that it was not he, that I could stake all I possess upon it."

"Then, sir, you'd lose it," doggedly answered Robin. "When the time comes that I choose to speak out——"

"What are you doing there?" burst forth Lionel, in severely haughty tones. And it caused Robin to start from his seat.

In a gap of the hedge behind them, Lionel had caught sight of a human face, its stealthy ears complacently taking in every word. It was that of Roy the bailiff.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PACKET IN THE DRAWER.

MRS. TYNN, the housekeeper at Verner's Pride, was holding one of those periodical visitations that she was pleased to call, when in familiar colloquy with her female assistants, a "rout out." It appeared to consist of turning a room and its contents upside down, and then putting them straight again. The chamber, this time subjected to the ordeal, was that of her late master, Mr. Verner. His drawers, closets, and other places consecrated to clothes, had not been meddled with since his death. Mrs. Verner, in some moment unusually (for her) given to sentiment, had told Tynn she should like to "go over his dear clothes" herself. Therefore Tynn left them for that purpose. Mrs. Verner, however, who loved her ease better than any earthly thing, and was more given to dropping off to sleep in her chair than ever, not only after dinner, but all day long, never yet had ventured upon the task. Mrs. Tynn suggested that she had better do it herself, after all; and her mistress acquiesced.

Look at Mrs. Tynn over that deep, open drawer full of shirts. She calls it "Master's shirt-drawer." Have the shirts scared away

her senses? She has sat herself down on the floor—almost fallen back as it seems—in some shock of alarm, and her mottled face has turned as white as her master's was, when she last saw him lying on that bed at her elbow.

"Go downstairs, Nancy, and stop there till I call you up again," she suddenly cried to her helpmate.

And the girl left the room, grumbling to herself: for Nancy at Verner's Pride did not improve in temper.

Between two of the shirts, in the very middle of the pile, Mrs. Tynn had come upon a parcel, or letter. Not a small letter—if it was a letter—but one of very large size, thick, looking not unlike a government despatch. It was sealed with Mr. Verner's own seal, and addressed in his own handwriting—"For my nephew, Lionel Verner. To be opened after my death."

Mrs. Tynn entertained not the slightest doubt that she had come upon the lost codicil. That it—the parcel—must have been lying quietly in the drawer since her master's death, was certain. The key of the drawer had remained in her own possession. When the search after the codicil took place, this drawer was opened—as a matter of form more than anything else—and Mrs. Tynn herself had lifted out the pile of shirts. There was no need to do it, she had assured those who were searching, for the drawer had been locked at the time the codicil was made, and the deed could not have been put into it. They accepted her assurance, and did not look between the shirts. It puzzled Mrs. Tynn, now, to think how it could have got in.

"I'll not tell Tynn," she soliloquized—she and Tynn being somewhat inclined to take opposite sides of a question,—"and I'll not say a word to my mistress. I'll go straight off now and give it into the hands of Mr. Lionel. What a blessed thing!—If he should be come into his own?"

The enclosed paved court before Lady Verner's residence had a broad flower-bed round it. It was inaccessible to the outer world, through the iron gates, and here Decima and Lucy Tempest were fond of lingering on a fine day. On this afternoon of Mrs. Tynn's discovery, they were there with Lionel. Decima went in for some string to tie up a fuchsia, just as Mrs. Tynn appeared at the iron gates.

Too eager to wait to go indoors, or to care for the presence of Lucy Tempest, Mrs. Tynn told her tale, and handed the paper to Lionel. "It's the missing codicil, as sure as that we are here, sir."

He saw the official-looking nature of the document, its great seal, and the superscription in his uncle's handwriting. Lionel did not doubt that it was the codicil, and the scarlet of emotion rose to his pale cheek.

"You don't open it, sir!" said the woman, as feverishly impatient as if the good fortune were her own.

No. Lionel did not open it. In his high sense of honour, he deemed that, before opening, it should be laid before Mrs. Verner. It had been found in her house; it concerned her son. "I think it will be better that Mrs. Verner should open this, Tynn," he quietly said.

"The mystery is, how it could ever have got into that shirt-drawer!" she continued. "I can declare that for a good week before my master died, up to the very day that the codicil was looked for, the drawer was never unlocked, nor the key out of my pocket."

She turned to go back to Verner's Pride, Lionel intending to follow her at once. He was going out at the gate when he caught the delighted eyes of Lucy Tempest fixed on him.

"I am so glad," she simply said. "Do you remember my telling you that you did not look like one who would have to live on bread and cheese?"

Lionel laughed in the joy of his heart. "I am glad also, Lucy. The place is mine by right, and it is just that I should have it."

When Lionel entered, Mrs. Verner had been hearing the news from Mary Tynn. She received Lionel graciously. First of all asking him what he would take—it was generally her chief question—and then inquiring what the codicil said.

"I have not opened it," replied Lionel.

"No!" said she, in surprise. "Why did you wait?"

He laid it on the table beside her. "Have I your cordial sanction to open it, Mrs. Verner?"

"You are ceremonious, Lionel. Open it at once. Verner's Pride belongs to you, more than to Fred; and you know I have always said so."

Lionel took up the deed. His finger was upon the seal when a thought crossed him: ought he to open it without further witnesses. He spoke his doubt aloud to Mrs. Verner.

"Ring the bell and have in Tynn," said she. "His wife also: she found it."

Lionel rang. Tynn and his wife both came in, in obedience to the request. Tynn looked at it curiously: and began rehearsing mentally a private lecture for his wife, for acting upon her own responsibility.

The seal was broken. The stiff writing-paper of the outer cover revealed a second cover of stiff writing-paper precisely similar to the first; but on this last there was no superscription. It was tied round with fine white twine. Lionel cut it, Tynn and Mrs. Tynn waited with the utmost eagerness: even Mrs. Verner's eyes were open wider than usual.

Alas for Lionel's hopes! The parcel contained nothing but a glove, and a small piece of writing-paper folded once. Lionel unfolded it, and read the following lines:

"This glove has come into my possession. When I tell you that I know where it was found and how you lost it, you will not wonder at the shock the discovery has been to me. I hush it up, Lionel, for your late father's sake, as much as for that of the name of Verner. I am about to seal it up that it may be given to you after my death: and you will then know why I disinherit you.—S. V."

Lionel gazed on the lines as one in a dream. They were in the handwriting of his uncle. Understand them, he could not. He took up the glove, a thick, fawn-coloured riding-glove, and remembered it as one of his own. When he had lost it, or where he had lost it, he knew no more than did the table at which he was standing. He had worn dozens of these gloves in the years gone by: up to the period when he had gone into mourning for John Massingbird, and, subsequently, for his uncle.

"What is it, Lionel?"

Lionel put the lines into his pocket, and pushed the glove toward Mrs. Verner. "I do not understand it in the least," he said. "My uncle appears to have found the glove somewhere, and he writes to say that he returns it to me. The chief matter that concerns us is"—turning his eyes on the servants—"that it is not the codicil!"

Mrs. Tynn lifted her hands. "How one may be deceived!" she uttered. "Mr. Lionel, I'd freely have laid my life upon it."

"It was not exactly my place to speak, sir; to give my opinion beforehand," interposed Tynn, "but I was sure that was not the lost codicil, by the very look of it. The codicil might have been about that size, and it had a big seal like that; but it was different in appearance."

"All that puzzled me was, how it could have got into the shirt-drawer," cried Mrs. Tynn. "As it has turned out not to be the codicil, of course there's no mystery about that. It may have been lying there weeks and weeks before the master died."

Lionel signed to them to leave the room: there was no longer any reason for their remaining in it. Mrs. Verner asked him what the glove meant.

"I assure you I do not know," was his reply. And he took it up, and examined it well again. One of his riding-gloves, scarcely worn, with a tear near the thumb: but there was nothing upon it, not so much as a trace, to afford any information. He rolled it up mechanically in the two papers, and placed them in his pocket, lost in thought.

"Do you know that I have heard from Australia?" asked Mrs. Verner.

The words aroused him thoroughly. "Have you? I did not know it."

"I wonder Mrs. Tynn did not tell you. The letters came this morning. If you look about"—turning her eyes on the tables—"you will find them somewhere."

Lionel knew that Mrs. Tynn had been too much absorbed in his business, to find room in her thoughts for letters from Australia. "Are these the letters?" he asked, taking up two from a side table.

"You'll know them by the post-marks. Do sit down and read them to me, Lionel. My sight is not good for letters now, and I couldn't read half that was in them. The ink's as pale as water. If it was the ink Fred took out, the sea must have washed into it. Yes, yes, you must read both to me, and I shall not let you leave me before dinner."

He did not like, in his good-nature, to refuse her. And he sat there and read the long letters. Read Sibylla's. Before the last one was fully accomplished, Lionel's cheeks had become hectic.

They had made a very quick and excellent passage. But Sibylla found Melbourne *hateful.* And Fred was ill; ill with fever. A fever was raging in a part of the crowded town, and he had caught it. She did not think it was catching, either, she added; people said it arose from over-population. They could not as yet hear of John, or his money, or anything about him; but Fred would see to it when he got better. They were at a part of Melbourne called Canvas Town, and she, Sibylla, was sick of it, and Fred drank heaps of brandy. If it were all land between her and home, she should set off at once on foot, and toil her way back again. She *wished* she had never come!. Everything she cared for, except Fred, seemed to be left behind in England.

Such was her letter. Fred's was gloomy also, in a different way. He said nothing about any fever. He mentioned, casually as it appeared, that he was not well, but that was all. He had not learned tidings of John, but had not had time yet to make inquiries. The worst piece of news he mentioned was the loss of his desk; which had contained the chief portion of his money. It had disappeared mysteriously immediately after being taken off the ship—he concluded by the light fingers of some thief, shoals of whom crowded on the quay. He was in hopes yet of finding it, and had not told Sibylla. That was all he had to say at present, but would write again by the next packet.

"It is not very cheering news on the whole, is it?" said Mrs. Verner, as Lionel folded the letters. "I knew Sibylla would only prove an encumbrance to Fred, out there; and I told him so. If Fred thought he was taking out a wife who would make shift with anything, and put up pleasantly with annoyances, he was mistaken.

Sibylla in Canvas Town! Poor girl! I wonder she married him. Don't you?"

"Rather so," answered Lionel, his hectic deepening.

"I do: especially to go to such a place. Sibylla's a pretty flower, made to sport in the sunshine; but she never was constituted for a rough life, or to get pricked by thorns."

Lionel's heart beat. It echoed to every word. Would that she could have been sheltered from the thorns, the rough usage of life, as he would have sheltered her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DR. WEST'S SANCTUM.

For some little time past, certain rumours had arisen in Deerham somewhat to the prejudice of Dr. West. Rumours of the same nature had circulated once or twice before during the progress of the last half-dozen years; but they had died away again, or been hushed up, never coming to anything. For one thing, their reputed scene had not lain at the immediate spot, but at Heartbury: and distance is a great discouragement to ill-natured tattle. This fresh scandal, however, was nearer home: it touched the very heart of Deerham, and people made themselves remarkably busy over it. None the less busy because its accusations were vague. Tales never lose anything in carrying, and the most outrageous things were whispered of Dr. West.

A year or two previous to this, a widow lady named Baynton, with two daughters, no longer very young, had come to live at a pretty cottage in Deerham. Nothing was known of who they were, or where they came from. They appeared to be very reserved, and made no acquaintances whatever. Under these circumstances, of course their history was supplied for them. It was said of Mrs. Baynton that she had been left in reduced means; had fallen from some pedestal of wealth through the death of her husband; that she lived in a perpetual state of mortification in consequence of her present poverty, and would not admit a single inhabitant of Deerham within her doors to witness it. It may have had as much truth in it as the greatest *canard* that ever flew: but Deerham promulgated it, Deerham believed in it, and the Bayntons never contradicted it. The best of all reasons, for this, may have been, that they had never heard of it. They lived quietly on alone, interfering with no one, and going out rarely. In appearance and manners they were gentlewomen, and rather haughty gentlewomen, too; but they kept no servant. How their work was done, Deerham

could not conceive: it was next to impossible to fancy one of those ladies scrubbing a floor or making a bed. The butcher called for orders, and took in the meat, which was nearly always mutton-chops; the baker left his bread at the door, and the laundress was admitted inside the passage once a week.

The only other person admitted within was Dr. West. He had been called in, on their first arrival, to the invalid daughter—a delicate-looking lady, who, when she did walk out, leaned on her sister's arm. Dr. West's visits grew frequent; they had continued frequent up to within a short period of the present time. Once or twice a week he called in, professionally; he would occasionally drop in for an hour in the evening. Some persons in passing Chalk Cottage (so it was named) had contrived to stretch their necks over the high privet hedge which hid the lower part of the dwelling from the road, and were immensely gratified by the fact of seeing Dr. West in the parlour, seated at tea with the family. How the doctor was questioned, especially in the earlier period of their residence, he alone could tell. Who were they? Were they well connected, or ill connected, or not connected at all? Were they known to fashion? How much was really their income? What was the matter with the one whom he attended, the sickly daughter, and what was her name? The questions would have gone on until now, but that the doctor stopped them. He had not made impertinent inquiries himself, he said, and had nothing at all to tell. The younger lady's complaint arose from disordered liver; he had no objection to tell them that: she had been so long a sufferer from it that the malady had become chronic: and her name was Kitty.

Now, it was touching this very family that the scandal had arisen. *How* it arose, was the puzzle: since the ladies themselves never spoke to any one, and Dr. West would not be likely to invent or to spread stories affecting himself. Its precise nature was buried in uncertainty, also its precise object: some said one thing, some another. The scandal, on the whole, tended to the point that Dr. West had misbehaved himself. In what way? What had he done? Had he personally ill-treated them—sworn at them—done anything else unbecoming a gentleman? And which had been the sufferer? The old lady in her widow's cap? or the sickly daughter? or the other one? Could he have carelessly supplied wrong medicine; sent to them arsenic instead of Epsom Salts, and so thrown them into fright, and danger, and anger? Had he scaled the privet hedge in the night, and robbed the garden of its cabbages? What, in short, *had* he done? Deerham spoke out pretty broadly, as to the main facts, although the rumoured details were varied and obscure. It declared that some of Dr. West's doings at Chalk Cottage had not been orthodox, and that discovery had supervened.

There are two classes of professional men upon whom not a taint should rest; who ought, in familiar phrase, to keep their hands clean: the parson of the parish, and the family doctor. Other people may dye themselves black, if they like; but, let the smallest spot fall on him who stands in the pulpit to preach to us, or on him who is admitted to familiar intercourse with our wives and children, and the spot grows into incredible dimensions. What is the old saying? "One man may walk in at the gate, while another must not look over the hedge." It runs something after that fashion. Had Dr. West not been a family doctor, the scandal might have been allowed to die out: as it was, Deerham kept the ball rolling. One chief motive in this, may have influenced Deerham above all other motives,—unsatisfied curiosity. Could Deerham have gratified this to the full, it had been content to subside into quietness.

Whether it was true, or whether it was false, there was no denying that it had happened at an unfortunate moment for Dr. West. A man always in debt—and what he did with his money Deerham could not make out, for his practice was a lucrative one—he had latterly become actually embarrassed. Dr. West was at his wits' end where to turn for a shilling—had been so, for some weeks past; so that he had no particular need of anything worse coming down upon him. Perhaps, what gave greater colouring to the scandal than anything else, was the fact, that, simultaneously with its rise, Dr. West's visits to Chalk Cottage had suddenly ceased.

Only one had been bold enough to speak upon the subject personally to Dr. West. And that was the proud old baronet, Sir Rufus Hautley. He rode down to the doctor's house one day; and, leaving his horse with his groom, had a private interview with the doctor. That Dr. West must have contrived to satisfy him in some way, was undoubted. Rigidly severe and honourable, Sir Rufus would no more have countenanced wrong-doing, than he would have admitted Dr. West again to his house, had the doctor been guilty of it. But when Sir Rufus went away, Dr. West attended him to the door, and they parted cordially.

Jan sat one day astride on the counter in his oft-abiding-place, the surgery. He had a brass vessel before him, and was mixing certain powders in it, preparatory to some experiment in chemistry, Master Cheese performing the part of looker-on, his elbows, as usual, on the counter.

"I say, we had such a start here this morning," began young Cheese, as if the recollection had suddenly occurred to him. "It was while you had gone your round."

"What start was that?"

"Some fellow came here, and—— I say, Jan," broke off young

Cheese, "did you ever know that room had a second entrance to it?"

He pointed to the door of the back-room: a room which was used exclusively by Dr. West. He had been known to see patients there on rare occasions, but neither Jan nor young Cheese was ever admitted into it. It opened with a latch-key only.

"There is another door leading into it from the garden," replied Jan. "It's never opened. It has all those lean-to boards piled against it."

"Is it never opened, then?" retorted Master Cheese. "You just hear. A fellow came poking his nose into the premises this morning, staring up at the house, staring round about him, and at last he walks in here. A queer-looking fellow he was, with a beard, and appeared as if he had come a thousand miles or two, on foot. 'Is Dr. West at home?' he asked. I told him the doctor was not at home: for, you see, Jan, it wasn't ten minutes since the doctor had gone out. So he said he'd wait. And he went peering about and handling the bottles, and once he took the scales up, as if he'd like to test their weight. I kept my eye on him: I thought a queer fellow like that might be going to walk off with some physic, as Miss Amilly walks off the castor oil. Presently he comes to that door. 'Where does this lead to?' said he. 'A private room,' said I, 'and please to keep your hands off it.' Not he. He lays hold of the false knob, and shakes it, and turns it, and pushes the door, trying to open it. It was locked. Old West had come out of there before going out; and catch him ever leaving that door open! I say, Jan, one would think he kept skeletons in there."

"Is that all?" asked Jan, alluding to the story.

"Wait a bit. The fellow put his big fist upon the key-hole—I think he must have been a feller of trees—and his knee to the door, and burst it open. Burst it open, Jan! You never saw such strength."

"I could burst any door open that I had a mind to," was the response of Jan.

"He burst it open," continued young Cheese, "and burst it against old West. You should have seen them stare! They both stared. I stared. I think the chap did not mean to do it; was only trying his strength for pastime. But now, Jan, the odd part of the business is, how did West get in? If there's not another door, he must have come down the chimney."

Jan went on with his mixing, and made no response.

"And if there *is* a door, he must have been mortal sly over it," resumed the young gentleman. "He must have gone right out from here, and in at the side-gate of the garden, and got in that way. I wonder what he did it for?"

"It isn't any business of ours," said Jan.

"Then I think it is," retorted Master Cheese. "I should like to know how many times he has been in there, listening to us, when we thought him a mile off. It's a shame!"

"It's nothing to me who listens," said Jan, equably. "I don't say things behind people's backs that I wouldn't say before their faces."

"I do," acknowledged young Cheese. "Wasn't there a row! Didn't he and the man go on at each other! They shut themselves up in that room, and had it out."

"What did the man want?" asked Jan.

"I should like to know. He and old West had it out together, I say, but they didn't admit me to the conference. Goodness knows where he had come from. West seemed to know him. Jan, I heard something about him and the Chalk Cottage folks yesterday."

"You had better take yourself off to a safe distance," advised Jan. "If this goes off with a bang, your face will come in for a benefit."

"I say, though, it's you who must take care and not let it go off," returned Master Cheese, edging nevertheless a little away. "But about that room? If old West——"

The words were interrupted. The door of the room in question was pushed open, and Dr. West came out of it. Had Master Cheese witnessed the arrival of an inhabitant from the other world he could not have experienced more intense astonishment. He had truly believed, as he had just expressed it, that Dr. West was at that moment a good mile away.

"Put your hat on, Cheese," said Dr. West.

Cheese put it on, going into a perspiration at the same time. He thought nothing less than that he was about to be dismissed.

"Take this note up to Sir Rufus Hautley's."

It was a great relief, and Master Cheese received the note in his hand, and went off whistling.

"Step in here, Mr. Jan," said the doctor.

Jan jumped off the counter, and stepped into the doctor's sanctum. Had Jan been given to speculation, he might have wondered what was coming: but it was Jan's method to take things cool and easy, as they came, and not anticipate them.

"My health has been bad of late," began the doctor.

"Law," cried Jan. "What has been the matter?"

"A general disarrangement of the system, I fancy," returned Dr. West. "I believe that the best thing to restore me will be change of scene—travelling; and an opportunity to embrace it has presented itself. I am solicited by an old friend of mine, in practice

in London, to take charge of a nobleman's son for some months: to go abroad with him."

"Is he ill?" asked Jan, to whom it never occurred to ask whether Dr. West had first of all applied to his old friend to seek such a post for him.

"His health is delicate, both mentally and bodily," replied Dr. West. "I should like to undertake it: the chief difficulty is, leaving you here alone."

"I dare say I can do it all," said Jan. "My legs get over the ground quickly. I can take to your horse."

"If you find you cannot do it, you might engage an assistant," suggested Dr. West.

"So I might," said Jan.

"I should see no difficulty at all in the matter, if you were my partner. It would be the same as leaving myself, and the patients could not grumble. But, it is not altogether the thing to leave only an assistant, as you are, Mr. Jan."

"Make me your partner, if you like," said cool Jan. "*I* don't mind. What'll it cost?"

"Ah, Mr. Jan, it will cost more than you possess. At least, it ought to cost it."

"I have five hundred pounds," said Jan. "I wanted Lionel to have it, but he won't. Is that of any use?"

Dr. West coughed. "Well, under the circumstances—— But it is very little! I am sure you must know that it is. Perhaps, Mr. Jan, we can come to some arrangement by which I take the larger share for the present. Say that, for this year, you forward me——"

"Why, how long do you mean to be away?" interrupted Jan.

"I can't say. One year, two years, three years—it may be even more than that. I expect this will be a long and a lucrative engagement. Suppose, I say, that for the first year you transmit to me the one-half of the net profits, and, beyond that, hand over to Deborah a certain sum, as shall be agreed upon, towards housekeeping."

"I don't mind how it is," said easy Jan. "They'll stop here, then?"

"Of course they will. My dear Mr. Jan, everything, I hope, will go on just as it goes on now, except that I shall be absent. You and Cheese—whom I hope you'll keep in order—and the errand boy: it will all be just as it has been. As to the assistant, that will be a future consideration."

"I'd rather be without one, if I can do it," cried Jan, "and Cheese will be coming on. Am I to live with 'em?"

"With Deb and Amilly? Why not? Poor unprotected old

things, what would they do without you? And now, Mr. Jan, as that is settled so far, we will sit down, and go further into details. I know I can depend upon your not mentioning this abroad."

"If you don't want me to mention it, you can. But where's the harm?"

"It is always well to keep these little arrangements private," said the doctor. "Matiss will draw up the deed, and I will take you round and introduce you as my partner. But nothing need be said beforehand. Neither need anything be said about my going away, until I actually go. You will oblige me in this, Mr. Jan."

"It's all the same to me," said accommodating Jan. "Whose will this room be, then?"

"Yours, to do as you please with, of course, so long as I am away."

"I'll have a turn-up bedstead put into it, and sleep here, then," quoth Jan. "When folks come in the night, and ring me up, I shall be handy. It'll be better than disturbing the house, as is the case now."

The doctor appeared struck with the proposition.

"I think it would be a very good plan indeed," he said. "I don't fancy the room's damp."

"Not it," said Jan. "If it were damp, it wouldn't hurt me. I have no time to be ill. Damp—— Who's that?"

It was a visitor to the surgery—a patient of Dr. West's. And, for the time, the conference was broken up.

Not to be renewed until evening. Dr. West and Jan were both fully occupied all the afternoon. When business was over—as much so as a doctor's business ever can be over—Jan knocked at the door of this room, where Dr. West again was.

It was opened about an inch, and the face of the doctor appeared in the aperture, peering to ascertain who might be disturbing him. The same aperture which enabled him to see out, enabled Jan to see in.

"Why! what's up?" cried unceremonious Jan.

Jan might well ask it. The room contained a table, a desk or two, several sets of drawers, and other receptacles for the custody of papers. All these were turned out, desks and drawers alike stood open, and their contents, a mass of papers, were scattered everywhere.

The doctor could not, in good manners, shut the door right in his proposed new partner's face. He opened it an inch or two more. His own face was purple: it wore a startled, perplexed look, and drops of moisture had gathered on his forehead. That he was not in the most easy frame of mind, was evident. Jan put one foot into the room: he could not put two, unless he had stepped upon the papers.

"What's the matter?" asked Jan, perceiving the signs of perturbation on the doctor's countenance.

"I have had a loss," said the doctor. "It's the most extraordinary thing, but a—a paper, which was here this morning, I cannot find anywhere. I *must* find it!" he added in suppressed agitation. "I'd rather lose everything I possess, than lose that."

"Where did you put it? When did you have it?" cried Jan, casting his eyes around.

"I kept it in a certain drawer," replied Dr. West, too much disturbed to be anything but straightforward. "I have not had it in my hand for—oh, I cannot tell how long—months and months, until this morning. I wanted to refer to it, and got it out. I was looking over it when a rough, ill-bred fellow burst the door open——"

"I heard of that," interrupted Jan. "Cheese told me."

"He burst the door open, and I put the paper back into its place before I spoke to him," continued Dr. West. "Half-an-hour ago I went to take it out again, and I found it had disappeared."

"The fellow must have walked off with it," cried Jan. Not an unnatural conclusion.

"He could not," said Dr. West; "it is quite an impossibility. I went back there,"—pointing to a bureau behind him—"and put in the paper hastily, and locked it, returning the keys to my pocket. The man had not stepped over the threshold of the door then; he was a little taken aback, I fancy, at having burst open the door, and he stood there staring."

"Could he have got at it afterwards?" asked Jan.

"It is, I say, an impossibility. He never was within a yard or two of the bureau; and, if he had been, the place was firmly locked. That man it certainly was not. No one has been in the room since, except myself, and you for a few minutes to-day when I called you in. And yet the paper is gone!"

"Could any one have come into the room by the other door?" asked Jan.

"No. It opens with a latch-key only, as this does. And the key was safe in my pocket."

"Well, this beats everything," cried Jan. "It's like the codicil at Verner's Pride."

"The very thing it put me in mind of," said Dr. West. "I'd rather—I'd rather have lost that codicil, had it been mine, than lose this, Mr. Jan."

Jan opened his eyes. Jan had a knack of opening his eyes when anything surprised him: tolerably wide, too. "What paper was it, then?" he cried.

"It was a prescription, Mr. Jan."

"A prescription!" returned Jan, the answer not lessening his wonder. "That's not much. Isn't it in the book?"

"No; it is not in the book," said Dr. West. "It was too valuable to be in the book. You may look, Mr. Jan, but I mean what I say. This was a prescription of inestimable value, a secret prescription, I may say. I would not have lost it for the whole world."

The doctor wiped the dew from his perplexed forehead; the doctor strove, unsuccessfully, to control his agitated voice. Jan could only stare. All this fuss about a prescription!

"Did it contain the secret for compounding Life's Elixir?" asked he.

"It contained what was more to me than that," said Dr. West. "But you can't help me, Mr. Jan. I would rather be left to the search alone."

"I hope you'll find it yet," returned Jan, taking the hint, and retreating to the surgery. "You must have overlooked it amongst some of these papers."

"I hope I shall," replied the doctor.

And he shut himself up to the search, and turned over the papers. But he never found what he had lost, although he was still turning and turning them at morning light.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MISS DEBORAH'S ASTONISHMENT.

ONE dark morning, the beginning of November: in fact, it was the first morning of that gloomy month: Jan was busy in the surgery. Jan was arranging things there according to his own pleasure; for Dr. West had departed that morning early, and Jan was master of the field.

Jan had risen betimes. Never a sluggard, he had been up now for some hours, and had effected so great a metamorphosis in the surgery that the doctor himself would hardly have known it again: things in it never having been previously arranged to Jan's satisfaction. And now he was looking at his watch to see whether breakfast-time was coming on, Jan's appetite reminding him that it might be acceptable. He had not yet been into the house; his bedroom now being the room you have heard of, the scene of Dr. West's lost prescription. The doctor had gone by the six-o'clock train, after a cordial farewell to Jan; he had gone—as it was soon to turn out—without having previously informed his daughters. But of this Jan knew nothing.

"Twenty minutes past eight," quoth Jan, consulting his watch,

a silver one, the size of a turnip. Jan had bought it when he was poor: had given about two pounds for it, second-hand. It never occurred to Jan to buy a better one while that legacy of his was lying idle. Why should he? Jan's turnip kept time to a moment, and Jan did not understand buying things for show. "Ten minutes yet! I shall eat a double share of bacon this morning. Good morning, Miss Deb."

Miss Deb was stealing into the surgery with a scared look and a white face. Miss Deb wore her usual winter morning costume, a huge brown cape. She was of a shivery nature at the best of times, but she shivered palpably now.

"Mr. Jan, have you a drop of ether?" asked she, her poor teeth chattering. Jan was too good-natured to tell Deerham those teeth were false, though Dr. West had betrayed the secret to Jan.

"Who's it for?" asked Jan. "For you? Aren't you well, Miss Deb? Eat some breakfast: that's the best thing."

"I have had a dreadful shock, Mr. Jan. I have had bad news. That is—what has been done to the surgery?" she broke off, casting her eyes round it in wonder.

"Not much," said Jan. "I have been making some odds and ends of alteration. Is the news from Australia?" he continued, the open letter in her hand helping him to the suggestion. "A mail's due."

Miss Deborah shook her head. "It is from my father, Mr. Jan. The first thing I saw, upon going into the breakfast-parlour, was this note for me, propped against the vase on the mantel-piece. Mr. Jan,"—dropping her voice to confidence—"it says he is gone! That he is gone away for an indefinite period."

"You don't mean to say he never told you of it before?" exclaimed Jan.

"I never heard a syllable from him," cried poor Deborah. "He says you'll explain to us as much as is necessary. You can read the note. Mr. Jan, where's he gone to?"

Jan ran his eyes over the note: feeling himself probably in somewhat of a dilemma, as to how much or how little it might be expedient to explain.

"He thought some travelling might be beneficial to his health," said Jan. "He has got a rare good post as travelling doctor to some young chap of quality."

Miss Deborah was looking very hard at Jan. Something seemed to be on her mind; some great fear. "He says he may not be back for ever so long to come, Mr. Jan."

"So he told me," said Jan.

"And is that the reason he took you into partnership, Mr. Jan?"

"Yes," said Jan. "Couldn't leave an assistant for an indefinite period."

"You will never be able to do it all yourself. I little thought, when all this bustle and changing of bedrooms was going on, what was up. You might have told me, Mr. Jan," she added reproachfully.

"It wasn't my place to tell you," returned Jan. "It was the doctor's."

Miss Deborah looked timidly round, and then sank her voice to a whisper. "Mr. Jan, *why* has he gone away?"

"For his health," persisted Jan.

"They are saying—they are saying—Mr. Jan, *what* is it that they are saying about papa and those ladies at Chalk Cottage?"

Jan laid hold of the pestle and mortar, popped in a big lump of some hard-looking white substance, and began pounding away at it. "How should I know anything about the ladies at Chalk Cottage?" asked he. "I never was inside their door; I never spoke to any one of 'em."

"But you know that things are being said," urged Miss Deborah, with almost feverish eagerness.

"Who told you anything was being said?" asked Jan.

"It was young Cheese. Mr. Jan, folks have seemed queer lately. The servants have whispered together, and then have glanced at me and at Amilly, and I knew there was something wrong, but I could not get at it. This morning, when I picked up this note—it's not five minutes ago, Mr. Jan—in my fright and perplexity I shrieked out; and Master Cheese said something about Chalk Cottage."

"What did he say?" asked Jan.

Miss Deborah's pale face turned crimson. "I can't tell," she said. "I did not hear the words rightly. Master Cheese caught them up again. Mr. Jan, I have come to you to tell me."

Jan answered nothing. He was pounding very fiercely.

"Mr. Jan, I ought to know it," she went on. "I am not a child. If you please, I must *request* you to tell me."

"What are you shivering for?" asked Jan.

"I can't help it. Is—is it anything that—that he can be taken up for?"

"Taken up!" replied Jan, ceasing his pounding, and fixing his wide-open eyes on Miss Deborah. "Can I be taken up for doing this?"—and he brought down the pestle with such force as to threaten destruction to the mortar.

"You'll tell me, please," she shivered.

"Well," said Jan, "if you must know it, the doctor had a misfortune."

"A misfortune! He! What misfortune! A misfortune at Chalk Cottage?"

Jan gravely nodded. "And they were in an awful rage with him, and said he should pay expenses, and all that. And he wouldn't pay expenses: the chimney-glass alone was twelve pound fifteen; and there was a regular quarrel, and they turned him out."

"But what was the nature of the misfortune?"

"He set the parlour chimney on fire."

Miss Deborah's lips parted with amazement; she appeared to find some difficulty in closing them again.

"Set the parlour chimney on fire, Mr. Jan!"

"Very careless of him," continued Jan, with composure. "He had no business to carry gunpowder about with him. Of course they won't believe but he flung it in purposely."

Miss Deborah could not collect her senses. "Who won't?—the ladies at Chalk Cottage?"

"The ladies at Chalk Cottage," assented Jan. "If I saw all these bottles go to smithereens, through Cheese stowing gunpowder in his trousers' pockets, I might go into a passion too, Miss Deb."

"But, Mr. Jan—*this* is not what's being said in Deerham?"

"Law, if you go by all that's said in Deerham, you'll have enough to do," cried Jan. "One says one thing, and one says another. No two are ever in the same tale. When that codicil was lost at Verner's Pride, ten different people were accused by Deerham of stealing it."

"Were they?" responded Miss Deborah, absently.

"Did you never hear it? You just ask Deerham about the row between the doctor and Chalk Cottage, and you'll hear ten versions, all different. What else could be expected? As if he'd take the trouble to explain the rights of it to them! Not that I should advise you to ask," concluded Jan, pointedly. "Miss Deborah, do you know the time?"

"It must be half-past eight," she repeated mechanically, her thoughts buried in reverie.

"And turned," said Jan. "I'd be glad of breakfast. I shall have the gratis patients here soon."

"It shall be ready in two minutes," said Miss Deborah, meekly. And she went out of the surgery.

Presently young Cheese came leaping into it. "Breakfast's ready," cried he.

Jan stretched out his long arm, and pinned Master Cheese.

"What have you been saying to Miss Deb?" he asked. "Look here: who is your master now?"

"You are, I suppose," said the young gentleman.

"Very well. You just bear that in mind; and don't go carrying

tales indoors of what Deerham says. Attend to your own business, and leave Dr. West's alone."

Master Cheese was considerably astonished. He had never heard such a speech from easy Jan.

"I say, though, are you going to turn out a bashaw with three tails?" asked he.

"Yes," replied Jan. "I have promised Dr. West to keep you in order, and I shall do it."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN INTERCEPTED JOURNEY.

Dr. West's was not the only departure from Deerham that was projected for that day. The other was that of Lionel Verner. Fully recovered, he had deemed it well to waste no more time. He fixed upon the first day of November for his departure for London, unconscious that that day had also been chosen by Dr. West for his. However, the doctor was off long before Lionel was out of bed.

Lionel rose all excitement, all impulse to begin his journey, and be away from Deerham. Some one else rose with less pleasurable sensations: and that was Lucy Tempest. Now that the time of separation had come, Lucy awoke to the state of her own feelings; to the fact, that the whole world contained but one beloved face for her—that of Lionel Verner.

She awoke with no start, she saw nothing wrong in it, she did not ask herself how it was to end, what the future was to be; any vision of marrying Lionel, which might have flashed across the active brain of a more sophisticated young lady, never occurred to Lucy. All she knew was, that she had somehow glided into a state of existence different from anything she had ever experienced before; that her days were all brightness, the world an Eden, and that it was the presence of Lionel that made the sunshine.

She stood before the glass, twisting her soft brown hair, her cheeks crimson with excitement, her eyes bright. The morrow morning would be listless enough; but *this*, the last on which she would see him, was gay with rose hues of love. Stay! not gay. That is a wrong expression: it would have been gay but for that undercurrent of feeling which was whispering that, a short hour or two, and all would change to darkness.

"He says it may be a twelvemonth before he shall come home again," she said to herself, her white fingers trembling as she fastened her pretty morning dress. "How lonely it will be! What shall we do all that time without him?"

She passed out of the room and descended, her soft skirts of pink cashmere sweeping the staircase. You saw her in it the evening she first came to Lady Verner's. It had lain by almost ever since, and was now converted into a morning dress. The breakfast-room was empty. Lady Verner had not risen, she rarely did rise to breakfast: and Decima was in Lionel's room, busy over some of his things.

Lionel himself was the next to enter. His features broke into a smile when he saw Lucy. A fairer picture, she, Mr. Lionel Verner, than even that other vision of loveliness which your mind has been pleased to make its ideal—Sibylla!

"Down first, Lucy!" he cried, shaking hands with her. "You wish me somewhere, I dare say, getting you up before your time."

"By how much—a few minutes?" she answered, laughing. "It wants twenty minutes to nine. What would they have said to me at the Rectory, had I come down so late as that?"

"Ah, well, you won't have me here to torment you to-morrow. I have been a trouble to you, Lucy, take it altogether. You will be glad to see my back turned."

Lucy shook her head. She looked shyly up at him in her timidity; but she answered truthfully still:

"I shall be sorry; not glad."

"Sorry! Why should you be sorry, Lucy?" and his voice insensibly assumed a tone of gentleness. "You cannot have cared for the companionship of a half-dead fellow such as I am!"

Lucy rallied her courage. "Perhaps it was because you were half dead that I cared for you," she answered.

"I suppose it was," mused Lionel, aloud, his thoughts in the past. "I will bid you good-bye now, Lucy, while we are alone. Believe that I part from you with regret; that I do heartily thank you for all you have been to me."

Lucy looked up at him, a yearning, regretful sort of look, and her eyelashes grew wet. Lionel had her hand in his, and was gazing down at her.

"Lucy, I do think you are sorry to part with me," he exclaimed.

"Just a little," she answered.

If you, good grave sir, had been stoical enough to resist the upturned face, Lionel was not. He bent his lips and left a kiss upon it.

"Keep it until we meet again," he whispered.

Jan came in while they were at breakfast.

"I can't stop a minute," were his words when Decima asked him why he did not sit down. "I thought I'd run up and say good-bye to Lionel, but I am wanted in all directions. Mrs. Verner has sent for me, and there are the regular patients to see to."

"Dr. West attends Mrs. Verner, Jan," said Decima.

"He did," replied Jan. "It is to be myself, now. West is gone."

"Gone!" was the universal echo. And Jan gave an explanation. It was received in silence. The rumours affecting Dr. West had reached Deerham Court.

"What is the matter with Mrs. Verner?" asked Lionel. "She appeared as well as usual when I left her last night."

"I don't know that there's anything more the matter with her than usual," returned Jan, sitting down on a side table. "She has been going in some time for apoplexy."

"Oh, Jan!" uttered Lucy.

"So she has, Miss Lucy,—as Dr. West has said. *I* have not attended her."

"Has she been told it, Jan?"

"Where's the good of telling her?" asked Jan. "She knows it fast enough. She'd not forego a meal if she saw the fit coming on before night. Tynn came round to me, just now, and said his mistress felt poorly. The Australian mail is in," continued Jan, passing to another subject.

"Is it?" cried Decima.

Jan nodded. "I met the postman as I was coming out, and he told me. I suppose there'll be news from Fred and Sibylla."

After this little item of information, which called up the colour into Lucy's cheek—she best knew why—but which Lionel appeared to listen to impassively, Jan got off the table.

"Good-bye, Lionel," said he, holding out his hand.

"What's your hurry, Jan?" asked Lionel.

"Ask my patients," responded Jan. "I am off the first thing to Mrs. Verner, and then shall take my round. I wish you luck, Lionel."

"Thank you, Jan," said Lionel. "Nothing less than the woolsack, of course."

"My gracious!" said literal Jan. "I say, Lionel, I'd not count upon that. If only one in a thousand gets to the woolsack, and all the lot expect it, what an amount of heart-burning must be wasted."

"Right, Jan. Only let me lead my circuit, and I shall deem myself lucky."

"How long will it take you before you can accomplish that?" asked Jan. "Twenty years?"

A shade crossed Lionel's countenance. That he was beginning late in life, none knew better than he. Jan bade him farewell, and departed for Verner's Pride.

Lionel's luggage had gone on, and he walked with a hasty step to the station. The train came in two minutes after he reached it. Lionel took his ticket and stepped into a first-class carriage.

All was ready. The whistle sounded, and the guard had one foot on his van, when a shouting and commotion were heard. "Stop! Stop!" Lionel looked out, and beheld the long legs of his brother Jan come flying along the platform. Before Lionel had well known what was the matter, or had gathered in the hasty news, Jan had pulled him out of the carriage, and the train went shrieking on without him.

"There goes my luggage, and here am I and my ticket!" cried Lionel. "You have done a pretty thing, Jan. *What* do you say?"

"It's all true, Lionel. She was crying over the letters when I got there. And pretty well I have raced back to stop your journey. Of course you will not go away now. He's dead."

"I don't understand, yet," gasped Lionel, feeling, however, that he did understand.

"Not understand," repeated Jan. "It's easy enough. Fred Massingbird's dead, poor fellow; he died of fever three weeks after they landed: and you are master of Verner's Pride."

CHAPTER XXX.

NEWS FROM AUSTRALIA.

LIONEL VERNER could scarcely believe in his own identity. The train, which was to have contained him, was whirling towards London; he, a poor aspirant for future fortune, ought to have been in it; but here was he, while the steam of that train yet snorted in his ears, walking out of the station, a wealthy man, come into the proud inheritance of his fathers. In the first moment of tumultuous thought, Lionel almost felt as if some fairy must have been at work with a magic wand.

It was all true. He linked his arm within Jan's, and listened to the recital in detail. Jan had found Mrs. Verner, on his arrival at Verner's Pride, weeping over letters from Australia: one from a Captain Cannonby, one from Sibylla. They contained the tidings that Frederick Massingbird had died of fever, and that Sibylla was anxious to come home again.

"Who is Captain Cannonby?" asked Lionel of Jan.

"Have you forgotten the name?" returned Jan. "That friend of Fred Massingbird's, who sold out, and was knocking about London: Fred went up once or twice to see him. He went to the diggings last autumn, and it seems Fred and Sibylla lighted on him in Melbourne. He had laid poor Fred in the grave the day before he wrote, he says."

"I can scarcely believe it all now, Jan," said Lionel. "What a change!"

The servants were gathered in the hall when Lionel and Jan entered. Decorously sorry, of course, for the tidings which had arrived, but unable to conceal the inward satisfaction which peeped out: not satisfaction at the death of Fred, but at the accession of Lionel. It is curious to observe how jealous the old retainers of a family are, upon all points which touch the honour or the well-being of the house. Fred Massingbird was an alien; Lionel was a Verner; and now, as Lionel entered, they formed into a double line that he might pass between them, their master from henceforth.

Mrs. Verner was in the old place—the study. Jan had seen her in bed that morning; but, since then, she had risen. Early as the hour yet was, recent as the sad news had been, Mrs. Verner had dropped asleep. She sat nodding in her chair, breathing heavily, her neck and face all one colour. That she looked—as Jan had observed—a very apoplectic subject, struck Lionel most particularly this morning.

"Why don't you bleed her, Jan?" he whispered.

"She won't be bled," responded Jan. "She won't take physic; she won't do anything that she ought to do. You may as well talk to a post. She'll do nothing but eat and drink, and fall asleep afterwards; and then wake up to eat and drink, and fall asleep again."

Lionel took up the letters handed to him by Mrs. Verner, and read the details. The closing part of Sibylla's letter ran as follows:

"After we wrote to you, Fred met Captain Cannonby. You must remember, dear aunt, how often Fred used to speak of him. Captain Cannonby has relatives out here, people in good position—if people can be said to be in any position at all in such a horrid place. We knew Captain Cannonby had come over, but thought he was at the Bendigo diggings. However, Fred met him; and he was very civil and obliging. He got us apartments in the best hotel—one of the very places that had refused us, saying they were crowded. Fred seemed to grow a trifle better, and it was decided that they should go to the place where John died, and try to get particulars about his money, etc., which in Melbourne we could hear nothing of. Indeed, nobody seemed to know even John's name. Captain Cannonby (who has really made money here in some way; trading, he says; and expects to make a good deal more) agreed to go with Fred. Then Fred told me of the loss of his desk and money, his bills of credit, and all that; whatever the term may be. It was stolen from the quay, the day we arrived, and he had never been able to hear of it; but, while there seemed a chance of finding it, he

would not let me know the bad news. Of course, with this loss upon us, there was all the more necessity for our getting John's money as speedily as possible. Captain Cannonby introduced me to his relatives, the Eyres, told them my husband wanted to go up the country for a short while, and they invited me to stay with them. And here I am, and very kind they are to me in this dreadful trouble.

"Aunt Verner, I thought I should have died when, a day or two after they started, I saw Captain Cannonby come back alone, with a long sorrowful face. I seemed to know in a moment what had happened: I had thought at the time they started, that Fred was too ill to go. I said to him, 'My husband is dead!' and he confessed that it was so. He had been taken ill at the end of the first day, and did not live many hours.

"I can't tell you any more, dear Aunt Verner; I am too ill to do so. And if I filled ten sheets with the particulars, it would not alter the dreadful facts. I want to come home to *you;* I know you will receive me, and let me live with you always. I have not any money. Please send me out sufficient to bring me home by the first ship that sails. I don't care for any of the things we brought out; they may remain here, or be lost in the sea, for all the difference it will make to me: I only want to come home. Captain Cannonby says he will take upon himself now to look after John's money, and transmit it to us, if he can get it.

"Mrs. Eyre has just come in. She desires me to say that they are taking every care of me, and are all happy to have me with them: she says I am to tell you that her own daughters are about my age. It is all true, dear aunt, and they really are exceedingly kind to me. They seem to have plenty of money, are intimate with the governor's family, and with what they call the society of the colony. When I think what my position would have been now, had I not met with them, I grow quite frightened.

"I have to write to papa, and must close this. I have requested Captain Cannonby to write to you himself, and give you particulars about the last moments of Frederick. Send me the money, without delay, dear aunt. The place is hateful to me now he is gone, and I'd rather die than stop in it.

"Your affectionate and afflicted niece,

"SIBYLLA MASSINGBIRD."

Lionel folded the letter, musingly. "It would almost appear that they had not heard of your son's accession to Verner's Pride," he remarked to Mrs. Verner. "It is not alluded to, in any way."

"I think it is certain that they have not heard of it," she answered. "I remarked so to Mary Tynn. The letters must have been delayed

in their passage. Lionel, you will see to the sending out the money for me."

"Immediately," replied Lionel.

"And when do you come home?"

"Do you mean—do you mean when do I come here?" returned Lionel.

"To be sure I mean it. It is your home. Verner's Pride is your home, Lionel, now; not mine. It has been yours this three or four months past, only we did not know it. You must come home to it at once, Lionel."

"I suppose it will be right that I should do so," he answered.

"And I shall be thankful," said Mrs. Verner. "There will be a master once more, and no need to worry me. I have been worried, Lionel. Mr. Jan"—turning to the bureau—"it's that which has made me feel ill. One comes to me with some trouble or other, and another comes to me: they *will* come to me. The complaints and tales of that Roy fidget my life out."

"I shall discharge Roy at once, Mrs. Verner."

Mrs. Verner made a deprecatory movement of the hands, as much as to say that it was no business of hers. "Lionel, I have only one request to make of you: never speak of the estate to me again, or of anything connected with its management. You are its sole master, and can do as you please."

Jan jumped off his bureau. Now that the edge of the surprise was over, and plans began to be discussed, Jan bethought himself of his sick folks, who were doubtlessly wondering at the non-appearance of their doctor. Lionel rose to depart with him: he was anxious to tell the news to Lady Verner.

"And send out this remittance, Lionel," said Mrs. Verner. "You will know how much to send. Tell Sibylla that Verner's Pride is no longer mine, and I cannot invite her to it. It would hardly be the—the thing for a young girl, and she's little better, to be living here with you all day long, and I always shut up in my room. Would it?"

Lionel somewhat haughtily shrugged his shoulders. "Scarcely," he answered.

"She must go to her sisters, of course. Poor girl! what a thing it seems, to have to return to her old house again!"

Jan put in his head. "I thought you said you were coming, Lionel?"

"So I am; this instant." And they departed together: encountering Mr. Bitterworth in the road.

He grasped Lionel in much excitement.

"Is it true, what people are saying? That you have come into Verner's Pride?"

"Quite true," replied Lionel. And he gave Mr. Bitterworth a summary of the facts.

"Now, look there!" cried Mr. Bitterworth, who was evidently deeply impressed; "it's of no use to try to go against honest right: sooner or later it will triumph. In your case, it has come wonderfully soon. I told my old friend that the Massingbirds had no claim to Verner's Pride; that if they were exalted to it, over your head, it would not prosper them. Not, poor fellows, that I thought of their death."

When he arrived at the Court, Lucy Tempest was alone, steadily practising. At sight of Lionel she started up in alarm.

"What is it? Why are you back?" she exclaimed. "Has the train broken down?"

Lionel smiled at her vehemence; at her unbounded astonishment altogether.

"The train has not broken down, I trust, Lucy. I did not go with it. Do you know where my mother is?"

"She has gone out with Decima."

He felt a temporary disappointment: the news, he was aware, would be so deeply welcome to Lady Verner. Lucy stood regarding him, waiting the solution of the mystery.

"What should you say, Lucy, if I tell you Deerham is not going to get rid of me at all?"

"I do not understand you," replied Lucy, colouring with surprise and emotion. "Do you mean that you are going to remain here?"

"Not here—in this house. That would be a calamity for you."

Lucy looked as if it would be anything but a calamity. "You are as bad as our French mistress at the Rectory," she said. "She would never tell us anything, but would make us guess."

Her words were interrupted by the clashing out of the church bells; a loud peal, telling of joy. A misgiving crossed Lionel that the news had got wind, and that some officious person had been having the bells rung in honour of his succession. The bad taste of the proceeding—should it prove so—called a flush of anger to his brow. His inheritance had cost Mrs. Verner her son.

He told Lucy the news, and she grew strangely excited. Lionel could see her heart beating,—could see the tears of emotion gathering in her eyes.

"Lionel—you will never go away now!"

"I suppose not."

"I am so glad! I may tell you that I am glad, may I not?"

She timidly held out her hand as she spoke. Lionel took it between both his, toying with it as tenderly as he had ever toyed with Sibylla's. And his low voice assumed a tone which was certainly not that of hatred, as he bent towards her.

"I am glad also, Lucy. The least pleasant part of my recent projected departure was the constantly remembered fact that I was about to put a distance of many miles between myself and you. It grew all too palpable towards the last."

Lucy laughed, and drew away her hand, her radiant countenance falling before Lionel's gaze.

"So you will be troubled with me yet, you see, Miss Lucy," he added in a lighter tone, as he left her, and strode off with a step that might have matched Jan's, on his way to ask the bells whether they were not ashamed of themselves.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ROY EATING HUMBLE-PIE.

AND so the laws of right and justice had triumphed, and Lionel Verner took possession of his own.

The news of Lionel Verner's succession fell upon Roy the bailiff, and he could have gnashed his teeth in very vexation. Had he foreseen what was to happen, he would have played his cards so differently. It had not entered into Roy's head to reflect that Frederick Massingbird might die. Scarcely, had it, that he *could* die. A man, young and strong, what was likely to take him off? John had died, it was true; but John's death had been a violent one. Had Roy argued the point at all, he might have assumed that because John had died, Fred was the more likely to live. It is a somewhat rare case for two brothers to be cut down in their youth and prime, one closely following the other.

Roy lived in a cottage standing alone, a little beyond Clay Lane, but not so far off as the gamekeeper's. At the moment when the bells rang out—causing surprise and vexation to Lionel—Roy happened to be at home. Roy never grudged himself holiday when it could be devoted to the benefit of his wife. A negative benefit she may have thought it, since it invariably consisted in what Roy called a "blowing of her up."

Mrs. Roy had heard that the Australian mail was in. But the postman had not been to their door, therefore no letter could have arrived for them from Luke. A great many mails, as it appeared to Mrs. Roy, had come in with the same result. That Luke had been murdered, as his master John Massingbird had been before him, was the least she feared. Her fears and troubles touching Luke were great; they were never at rest; and her tears fell frequently. All this excited Roy's ire.

She sat in a rocking-chair in the kitchen—a chair which had

been new when the absent Luke was a baby, and which was sure to be the seat chosen by Mrs. Roy when she was in a mood to indulge in moaning over her tribulations. The kitchen opened to the road, as was the case with many of the kitchens in Deerham; a parlour was on the right, used only on the grand occasion of receiving visitors; and the stairs, leading to two rooms above, ascended from the kitchen. Here she sat, silently wiping away her tears with a red pocket-handkerchief. Roy was not in the sweetest temper himself that morning, so of course he turned it upon her.

"There you be, snivelling as usual! I'd have a bucket always at my feet, if I was you. It might save the trouble of catching rain-water."

"If the letter-man had got anything for us, he'd have been round here an hour ago," responded Mrs. Roy, bursting into unrestrained sobs.

Now, this happened to be the very grievance that was affecting the gentleman's temper—the postman's not having gone there. They had heard that the Australian mail was in. Not that he was actuated by any strong paternal feelings—such sentiments did not trouble Mr. Roy. The hearing or not hearing from his son would not thus have disturbed his equanimity. He took it for granted that Luke was alive somewhere—probably getting on—and was content to wait until he or a letter should turn up. The one whom he had expected to hear from was his new master, Mr. Massingbird. He had fondly indulged the hope that credentials would arrive for him, confirming him in his place as manager; he believed that this mail would inevitably bring them, as the last mails had not. Hence he had stayed at home to receive the postman. But the postman had not come, and it upset Roy's temper.

"They be a-coming back, that's what it is," was the conclusion he arrived at, in allusion to Mr. and Mrs. Massingbird. "Perhaps they have come by this very ship! Luke may be come by it, too."

The words appeared to startle Mrs. Roy; she looked up, and he saw that her face had gone white with terror.

"Why! what *does* ail you?" cried he, in wonder. "Be you took crazy?"

"I don't want him to come home," she replied in an awe-struck whisper. "Roy, I don't want him to come."

"You don't want to be anything but an idiot," returned Roy, with supreme contempt.

"But I'd like to hear from him," she wailed, swaying herself to and fro. "I'm always a dreaming of it."

"You'll just dream a bit about getting the dinner ready," commanded Roy, morosely; "that's what you'll dream about now,

Hark ye! I'm a-going now, but I shall be in at twelve, and if it ain't ready, mind your skin!"

He swung open the kitchen door just in time to hear the church bells ring out a joyous peal. It surprised Roy. In quiet Deerham, such sounds were not very frequent.

"What's up, now?" cried Roy, savagely. Not that the fact of the bells ringing was of any moment to him, but he was in a mood to be angry with everything. "Here, you!" continued he, seizing a boy who was running by, "what be them bells a-clattering for?"

Thus summarily brought-to, the boy had no resource but to stop. It was a young gentleman whom you have had the pleasure of meeting before—Master Dan Duff. So fast had he been flying that a moment or two elapsed ere he could get breath to speak.

The delay did not tend to soothe his captor; and he administered a slight shaking. "Can't you speak, Dan Duff? Don't you see who it is that's asking you? What be them bells a-ringing for?"

"Please, sir, it's for Mr. Lionel Verner."

The answer took Roy somewhat aback. He knew—as every one else knew—that Mr. Lionel Verner's departure from Deerham was fixed for that day; but to believe that the bells would ring out a peal on that account staggered even Roy's ears. Dan Duff found himself treated to another shaking, together with a sharp reprimand.

"So they be a-ringing for him!" panted he. "There ain't no call to shake me for saying so. Mr. Lionel have got Verner's Pride at last, and he ain't going away at all, and the bells be a-ringing for it. Mother have sent me to tell the gamekeeper. She said he'd sure to give me a penny, if I was the first to tell him."

Roy released the boy. His arms and his mouth both fell. "Is that—that there codicil found?" gasped he.

Dan Duff shook his head. "I dun know nothink about codinals," said he. "Mr. Fred Massingbird's dead. He can't keep Mr. Lionel out of his own any longer, and the bells is a-ringing for joy!"

Unrestrained now, he sped away. Roy was not altogether in a state to stop him. He had turned to a glowing heat, and was asking himself whether the news could be true. Mrs. Roy stepped forward, her tears arrested.

"Law, Roy, whatever shall you do?" spoke she, deprecatingly. "I said as you should have kept in with Mr. Lionel. You'll have to eat humble-pie for certain."

The humble-pie would taste none the more palatable for his being thus reminded of it by his wife, and Roy drove her back with a shower of harsh words. He shut the door with a bang, and went out, indulging a forlorn hope that the news might be false.

But the news, he found, was too true. Frederick Massingbird was really dead, and the true heir had come into his own.

Roy stood in much inward perturbation. To eat humble-pie—as Mrs. Roy had been kind enough to suggest—would not cost much to a man of his nature; but he entertained a shrewd suspicion that no amount of humble-pie would avail him with Mr. Verner: that, in short, he should be entirely discarded. While thus standing, the centre of a knot of gossipers, for the news had caused Deerham to collect in groups, the bells ceased as suddenly as they had begun, and Lionel Verner himself was observed coming from the direction of the church. Roy stood out from the rest, and as a preliminary slice of the humble-pie, took off his hat, and stood bare-headed while Lionel passed by.

It availed him nothing. On the following day Roy found himself summoned to Verner's Pride. He went up, and was shown to the old business room—the study.

Ah! things were changed now; changed from what they had been; and Roy was feeling it to his heart's core. It was no longer the feeble invalid, Stephen Verner, who sat there; to whom all business was unwelcome, and who shunned it as much as possible, leaving it to Roy: it was no longer the ignorant and easy Mrs. Verner, to whom (as she herself had once expressed it) Roy could represent white as black, and black as white: but he who reigned now was essentially master of himself and of all who were dependent on him.

Roy felt it the moment he entered: felt it keenly. Lionel stood before a table covered with papers. He appeared to have risen from his chair and to be searching for something. He lifted his head when Roy appeared, left the table, and stood looking at the man, his figure drawn up to its full height. The nobility of the face and form struck even Roy.

But Lionel greeted him in quiet, courteous tones: to meet the poorest person on his estate otherwise than courteously was next to impossible for Lionel Verner. "Sit down, Roy," he said. "You are at no loss, I imagine, to guess what my business is with you."

Roy did not accept the offered seat. He stood in discomfiture, saying something to the effect that he would change his mode of dealing with the men, would do all he could to give satisfaction to his master, Mr. Verner, if the latter would consent to keep him on.

"You must know, yourself, that I am not likely to do it," returned Lionel, briefly. "But I do not wish to be harsh, Roy,—I trust I shall never be harsh with any one—and if you choose to accept work on the estate you can do so."

"You won't continue me in my post over the brickyard, sir—over the men generally?"

"No," replied Lionel. "Perhaps the less we go into those past matters the better. *I* have no objection to speak of them, Roy;

but, if I do, you will hear some home truths that may not be palatable to you. You can have work, if you wish it; and good pay."

"As one of the men, sir?" asked Roy, a suspicion of grumbling in his tone.

"As one of the superior men."

Roy hesitated. The blow had fallen; but it was only what he had feared. "Might I ask if you'd give me a day to consider it over, sir?" he presently said.

"A dozen days if you choose. The work is always to be had: it will not run away: if you prefer to spend time deliberating the point, it is your affair, not mine."

"Thank you, sir. Then I'll think it over. It'll be hard lines, coming down to a workman, where I've been, as may be said, a sort of master."

"Roy."

Roy turned. He had been moving away. "Yes, sir."

"I shall expect you to pay rent for your cottage now, if you remain in it. Mr. Verner, I believe, threw it in with your post; made it part of your perquisites. Mrs. Verner has, no doubt, done the same. But that is at an end. I can show no more favour to you than I do to others."

"I'll think it over, sir," concluded Roy, his tone as sullen as he dared make it. And he departed.

Before the week was out, he came again to Verner's Pride, and said he would accept work, and pay rent for the cottage: but he hoped Mr. Verner would name a fair rent.

"I should not name an unfair one," was the reply of Lionel. "You will pay the same as others pay, whose dwellings are the same size as yours. Mr. Verner's scale was not high, as you know: I shall not alter it."

And so Roy continued on the estate.

A short time elapsed. One night Jan Verner, upon getting into bed, found he need not have taken that trouble, for the night-bell rang, and Jan had to get up again. He opened his window and called out to ask who was there. A boy came round from the surgery door, and Jan recognized him as the youngest son of his brother's gamekeeper, a youth of twelve. He said his mother was ill.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Jan.

"Please, sir, she's took very bad, a-groaning awful. Father thinks she'll die."

Jan dressed himself and started off, carrying with him a dose of tincture of opium. When he arrived, however, he found the woman so violently sick and ill, that he suspected it did not arise simply from natural causes. "What has she been eating?" inquired Jan.

"Some late mushrooms out of the fields."

"Ah, that's just it," said Jan. And he knew the woman had been poisoned. He took a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote a rapid direction, and ordered the boy to carry it to the house, and give it to Mr. Cheese.

"Now, look you, Jack," said he. "If you want your mother to get well, you'll go there and back as fast as your legs can carry you. I can do little good until you bring me what I have sent for. Go past the Willow Pool, and straight across to my house."

The boy looked aghast at the injunction. "Past the Willow Pool!" echoed he. "I'd not go past there, sir, at night, for all the world."

"Why not?" questioned Jan.

"I'd see Rachel Frost's ghost, may be," returned Jack, his round eyes open with fright.

The conceit of seeing a ghost amused Jan beyond everything. He sat down on a high press that was in the kitchen, and grinned at the boy. "What would the ghost do to you?" cried he.

Jack Broom could not say. All he knew was, that neither he nor a good many more had gone near that pond at night since the report had arisen (which of course it had, simultaneously with the death) that Rachel's ghost was to be seen there.

"Wouldn't you go to save your mother?" cried Jan.

"I'd—I'd not go to win a leg of mutton on a greased pole," responded the boy, in a mortal terror lest Jan should send him.

"You are a nice son, Mr. Jack! A brave young man, truly!"

"Jim Hook, he was a-going by the pond one night, and see'd it," cried the boy, earnestly. "It don't take two minutes longer to cut down Clay Lane, please, sir."

"Be off, then," said Jan, "and see how quick you can be. What has put such a thing into his head?" he presently asked of the gamekeeper, who was hard at work, preparing hot water.

"Little fools!" ejaculated the man. "I think the report first took its rise, sir, through Robin Frost's going to the pond of a moonlight night, and walking round about it."

"Robert Frost!" cried Jan. "What did he do that for?"

"What indeed, sir! It did no good, as I told him more than once, when I came upon him there. He has not been lately, I think. Folks got up a talk that Robin went there to meet his sister's spirit, and it put the youngsters into a fright."

Back came Mr. Jack in an incredibly short time. He could not have come much quicker, had he dashed right through the pool. Jan set himself to his work, and did not leave the woman until she was better. That was the best of Jan Verner. He paid every atom as much attention to the poor as he did to the rich. Jan

never considered who or what his patients were: all his object was, to get them well.

His nearest way home lay past the pool, and he took it: *he* did not fear poor Rachel's ghost. It was a sharpish night, bright, somewhat of a frost. As Jan neared the pool, he turned his head towards it and half stopped, gazing on its still waters. He had been away when the catastrophe happened; but the circumstances had been detailed to him. "How it would startle Jack and a few of those timid ones," said he, aloud, "if some night——"

"Is that you, sir?"

Any one with nerves less serene than Jan's might have started at the sudden interruption. Not so Jan. He turned with composure, and saw Bennet, the footman from Verner's Pride. The man had come up hastily, and was in search of Jan Verner. His mistress had been taken ill with some sort of fit. Jan hastened to Verner's Pride, and found the fit was apoplexy.

Mrs. Verner never rallied. She lived only until the dawn of morning. Scarcely had the clock told eight, when the death-bell went booming over the village: the bell of that very church which had recently rung so merrily for the succession of Lionel. And when people came running from far and near to inquire for whom the passing-bell was tolling, they hushed their voices and their footsteps when informed that it was for Mrs. Verner.

Verily, within the last year, Death had made himself at home at Verner's Pride!

CHAPTER XXXII.

JAN'S REMEDY FOR A COLD.

A COLD bright day in mid-winter. Luncheon was just over at Deerham Court, and Lady Verner, Decima, and Lucy Tempest had gathered round the fire in the dining-room. Lucy had a cold. *She* laughed at it; said she was used to colds; but Lady Verner had insisted upon her wrapping herself in a shawl, and not stirring out of the dining-room for the day; for it was the warmest room in the house. So there reclined Lucy in state, in an arm-chair with cushions; half laughing at being made into an invalid, half rebelling.

Lady Verner sat opposite to her. She wore a rich black silk dress—mourning for Mrs. Verner—and a white lace cap of finest guipure. The white gloves on her hands were without a wrinkle, and her curiously fine handkerchief lay on her lap. Lady Verner could indulge her taste for snowy gloves and delicate handkerchiefs now, untroubled by the thought of the money they cost. The addi-

tion to her income which she had spurned from Stephen Verner, she accepted largely from Lionel. Lionel was liberal as a man and as a son. He would have given the half of his fortune to his mother, and not said "It is a gift." Deerham Court had its carriage and horses now, and Deerham Court had its additional servants. Lady Verner visited and received company, and the look of care had gone from her face, and the querulous tone from her voice.

But it was in Lady Verner's nature to make a trouble of things; and if she could not do it in great matters, she must do it in trifles. To-day occurred this cold of Lucy's, and that afforded scope for Lady Verner. She sent for Jan as soon as breakfast was over, in defiance of the laughing protestations of Lucy. But Jan had not yet made his appearance, and Lady Verner waxed wroth.

He was coming in now,—now, as the servant was carrying out the luncheon-tray, entering as usual by the back-door, and nearly knocking over the servant and tray in his haste, as his long legs strode to the dining-room. Lady Verner had left off reproaching Jan with using the servants' entrance, finding it waste of time: Jan would have come down the chimney with the sweeps, had it saved him a moment. "Who's ill?" asked he.

Lady Verner answered the question by a sharp reprimand, touching Jan's tardiness.

"I can't be in two places at once," good humouredly replied Jan. "I have been with one patient since four o'clock this morning. Who is ill here?"

Lucy explained her ailments, giving Jan her own view of them. There was nothing the matter with her but a slight cold.

"Law!" contemptuously returned Jan. "If I didn't think some one must be dying! Cheese said they'd been after me five or six times!"

"If you don't like to attend Miss Tempest, you can let it alone," said Lady Verner. "I can send elsewhere."

"I'll attend any one that I'm wanted to attend," said Jan. "Where do you feel symptoms of the cold?" asked he of Lucy. "In the head or chest?"

"I am beginning to feel them a little here," replied Lucy, touching her chest.

"Only beginning to feel them, Miss Lucy?"

"Only beginning, Jan."

"Well, then, just wring out a long strip of rag in cold water, and put it round your neck, letting the ends rest on the chest," said Jan; "A doubled piece, two or three inches broad. It must be covered outside with thin waterproof skin to keep the wet in: you know what I mean: Decima has some: oil-skin's too thick. And get some-toast-and water, or lemonade; any liquid you like; sip a little

of it every minute, letting it go down slowly. You'll soon get rid of your sore chest if you do this: and you'll have no cough."

Lady Verner listened to these directions in unqualified amazement. She had been accustomed to the very professional remedies of Dr. West. Decima laughed. "Jan," said she, "I could fancy an old woman prescribing this, but not a doctor."

"It'll cure," returned Jan. "It will prevent any cough coming on: and prevention's better than cure. Try it at once, Miss Lucy; and you'll soon see. You will know then what to do if you catch cold in future."

"Jan," interposed Lady Verner, "I consider the very mention of such remedies beneath the dignity of a medical man."

Jan opened his eyes. "But if they are the best remedies, mother?"

"At any rate, Jan, if this is your fashion of prescribing, you will not fill your pockets," said Decima.

"I don't want to fill my pockets by robbing people," returned plain Jan. "If I know a remedy that costs nothing, why shouldn't I let my patients have the benefit of it, instead of charging them for drugs that won't do them half the good?"

"Jan," said Lucy, "if it cost gold I should try it. I have great faith in what you say."

"All right," replied Jan. "But it must be done at once, mind. If you let the cold get ahead first, it will not be so efficacious. And now good day to you all, for I must be off to my patients. Good-bye, mother."

Away went Jan. And, amidst much laughter from Lucy, the wet "rag," Jan's elegant phrase for it, was put round her neck, and covered up. Lionel came in, and they amused him by reciting Jan's prescription.

"It is this house which has given her the cold," grumbled Lady Verner, who invariably threw faults and misfortunes upon something or some one. "The servants are for ever opening that side-door, and then comes a current of air through the passage. Lionel, I am not sure but I shall leave Deerham Court."

Lionel leaned against the mantel-piece, a smile upon his face. He had completely recovered his good looks, frightened away though they had been for a time by his illness. He was in deep mourning for Mrs. Verner. Decima looked up, surprised at Lady Verner's last sentence. She felt sure her mother was attached to the house, and would never quit it. Her eyes said as much as they encountered Lionel's.

"I wish my mother would leave Deerham Court and come to me," he said aloud. "Verner's Pride wants a mistress."

"It will not find one in me," said Lady Verner. "Were you an

old man, Lionel, I might then come. Not as it is. You will be marrying some time."

"I suppose I shall be," replied Lionel; and his eyes, as he spoke, involuntarily strayed to Lucy. She caught the look, and blushed vividly.

"How much of that do you intend to take, Miss Lucy?" asked Lionel, as she sipped the lemonade.

"Ever so many tumblers of it," she answered. "Jan said I was to keep sipping it all day long. The water, going slowly down, heals the cold."

"I believe if Jan told you to drink boiling water, you'd do it, Lucy," cried Lady Verner. "You seem to agree with all he says."

"Because I like him, Lady Verner. Because I have faith in him: and if Jan prescribes a thing, I know that he has faith in it himself."

"It is not displaying a refined taste to like Jan," observed Lady Verner, intending the words as a reprimand to Lucy.

But Lucy stood up for Jan. Even at the risk of openly disagreeing with Lady Verner, Lucy would not be unjust to one whom she deemed of sterling worth.

"I like Jan very much," said she, resolutely, in her championship. "There's no one I like so well as Jan, Lady Verner."

Lady Verner made a slight movement with her shoulders. It was almost as much as to say that Lucy was growing as hopelessly incorrigible as Jan.

"*No one* you like so well as Jan, did you say?" quietly asked Lionel.

Poor Lucy! If Lionel's look, just before, had brought the hot blush to her cheek, that blush was nothing compared with the glow which mantled there now. She had not been thinking of one sort of liking when she so spoke of Jan: the words had come forth in the honest simplicity of her heart.

Did Lionel read the signs aright, as her eyes fell before his? Very probably. A smile stole over his lips.

"I do like Jan very much," stammered Lucy, essaying to mend the matter. "I *may* like him, I suppose? There's no harm in it."

"Oh! no harm, certainly," spoke Lady Verner, with a spice of irony. "I never thought Jan could be a favourite before. Not being fastidiously polished yourself, Lucy—forgive me for saying so—you entertain, I conclude, a fellow-feeling for Jan."

Lucy—for Jan's sake—would not be beaten.

"Don't you think it is better to be like Jan, Lady Verner, than—than—like Dr. West, for instance?"

"In what way?" returned Lady Verner.

"Jan is so true," debated Lucy, ignoring the question.

"And Dr. West was not, I suppose," retorted Lady Verner. "He wrote false prescriptions, perhaps? Gave false advice?"

Lucy looked a little foolish. "I will tell you the difference, as it seems to me, between Jan and other people," said she. "Jan is like a rough diamond—real within, unpolished without—but a genuine diamond withal. Many others are but the imitation stone—glittering without, false within."

Lionel was amused.

"Am I one of the false ones, Miss Lucy?"

She took the question literally.

"No; you are true also," she answered, shaking her head, and speaking earnestly.

"Lucy, my dear, I would not espouse Jan's cause so warmly, were I you," advised Lady Verner. "It might be misconstrued."

"How so?" simply asked Lucy.

"It might be thought that you—pray excuse the vulgarity of the suggestion—were in love with Jan."

"In love with Jan!" Lucy paused a moment after the words, and then burst into a merry fit of laughter. "Oh, Lady Verner! I cannot fancy any one falling in love with Jan. I don't think he would know what to do."

"I don't think he would," quietly replied Lady Verner.

A peal at the courtyard bell, and the letting down the steps of a carriage. The visitors were the Countess of Elmsley and Lady Mary. They were shown to the drawing-room, and Lady Verner and Decima went to them. Lionel crossed over to Miss Tempest.

"Lucy, I thank you for your partisanship of Jan," he said in low, earnest tones. "I do not believe any one living knows his worth."

"Yes; for I do," she replied, her eyes sparkling.

"Only, don't you get to like him too much—as Lady Verner hinted," continued Lionel, his eyes dancing with merriment at his own words.

Lucy's eyelashes fell on her hot cheek. "Please not to be so foolish," she answered pleadingly.

"Or a certain house—that has been mentioned this morning—might have to go without a mistress for good," he whispered.

What made him say it? It is true he spoke lightly, jokingly; but the words were unjustifiable, unless he meant to follow them up seriously in the future. He *did* mean to do so when he spoke them.

"You ought to take Jan to live at Verner's Pride," said Lucy to him, the words unconsciously proving that she had understood Lionel's allusion to it. "If he were my brother, I would not allow him to be always slaving at his profession."

"If he were your brother, Lucy, you would find that Jan would slave just as he does now, in spite of you. Were Jan to come into

Verner's Pride to-morrow, through my death, I really believe he would let it, and live on where he does, and doctor the parish to the end of time."

"Will Verner's Pride go to Jan after you?"

"That depends upon circumstances. It would, were I to die as I am now, a single man. But I may have a wife and children some time, Lucy."

"So you may," said Lucy, filling up her tumbler with lemonade. "Please go into the drawing-room now, or Lady Verner will be vexed. Mary Elmsley's there, you know."

She gave him a saucy glance from her soft bright eyes. Lionel laughed.

"Who made you so wise about Mary Elmsley, young lady?"

"Lady Verner," was Lucy's answer, her voice subsiding into a confidential tone. "She tells us all about it, me and Decima, when we are sitting by the fire of an evening. *She* is to be mistress of Verner's Pride."

"Oh, indeed," said Lionel. "She is, is she? Shall I tell you something, Lucy?"

"Well?"

"If that ever comes to pass, I shall not be its master."

Lucy looked pleased. "That is just what Decima says to Lady Verner. I wish you would go to them."

"So I will. Good-bye. I shall not come in again. I have a hundred-and-one things to do this afternoon."

He took her hand and held it. She, ever courteous in manner, simple though she was, rose and stood before him to say her adieu, her eyes raised to his, her pretty face upturned.

Lionel gazed down upon it. And, as he had forgotten himself once before, so he now forgot himself again. He clasped it to him with a sudden movement of affection, and left on it some fervent kisses, whispering tenderly:

"Take care of yourself, my darling Lucy!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IMPROVEMENTS.

THINGS had changed out of doors. There was no dissatisfaction, no complaining. Roy was deposed from his petty authority, and all men were at peace. With the exception, possibly, of Mr. Peckaby. Mr. Peckaby did not find his shop flourishing. Indeed, far from flourishing, so completely was it deserted, that he was fain to give up the trade, and accept work at Chuff the blacksmith's, to which

employment, it appeared, he had been brought up. A few stale articles remained in the shop, and the counters remained; chiefly for show. Mrs. Peckaby made a pretence of attending to customers; but she did not have two a week. And if those two entered, they could not be served, for she was pretty sure to be out, gossiping.

This state of things did not suit Mrs. Peckaby. From one point of view the failing trade pleased her, because it left her less work to do; but she did not like the failing income. Whether the shop had been actually theirs, or whether it had been Roy's, there was no doubt that they had drawn sufficient from it to live comfortably and to find Mrs. Peckaby in smart caps. This source was stopped, and all they had now was the ignominious fourteen shillings a week which Peckaby earned. The prevalent opinion in Clay Lane was, that this was quite as much as Peckaby deserved; and that it was a special piece of undeserved good fortune which had taken off Joe Chuff, the blacksmith's brother and assistant, in the nick of time, to make room for him. Mrs. Peckaby, however, was in a state of semi-rebellion; all the worse, that she did not know upon whom to visit it, or see any remedy for it. She took to passing her time in groaning and tears, somewhat after the fashion of Dinah Roy, venting her complaints upon any one who would listen to her.

Lionel had not said to the men, "You shall leave Peckaby's shop." He had not even hinted to them that it might be desirable to leave it. In short, he had not interfered. But, Roy's restraint being removed from the men, they left it of their own accord. "No more Roy; no more Peckaby; no more grinding down—hurrah!" shouted they, and went back to the old shops in the village.

All sorts of improvements had Lionel now in hand. That is, he had planned them: begun yet, they were not. Building better tenements for the labourers, repairing and draining the old ones, adding whatever might be wanted to make the dwellings healthier: draining, ditching, hedging. "It shall not be said that while I live in a palace, my poor live in misery," said Lionel to Mr. Bitterworth one day. "I'll do what I can to drive that periodical ague from the place."

"Have you counted the cost?" was Mr. Bitterworth's rejoinder.

"No," said Lionel. "I don't intend to count it. Whatever the changes may cost, I shall carry them out."

And Lionel, like other new schemers, was red-hot upon them. He drew out plans in his head and with his pencil; he consulted architects, he spent half his days with builders. It was upon these various topics that his mind was running as he walked away from Deerham Court after the afternoon's interview with Lucy, which he had made so significant.

Here, a piece of stagnant water was to be filled in; there, was the site of his new tenements; yonder, was the spot for a library and reading-room. On he walked, throwing his glances everywhere. As he neared Mrs. Duff's shop, a man came suddenly into view, facing him: a little man, in a suit of rusty black and a white neck-cloth, with a pale face and red whiskers, whom Lionel remembered to have seen once before, a day or two previously. As soon as he caught sight of Lionel, he turned short off, crossed the street, and darted out of sight down Belvidere Road.

"That looks as though he wanted to avoid me," thought Lionel. "I wonder who he can be? Do you know that man, Mrs, Duff?" asked he, aloud. For that lady was taking the air at her shop-door, and had watched the movement.

"I don't know much about him, sir. He has been stopping in the place this day or two. What did I hear his name was, again?" added Mrs. Duff, putting her fingers to her temples in a considering attitude. "Jarrum, I think. Yes, that was it. Brother Jarrum, sir."

"Brother Jarrum?" repeated Lionel, uncertain whether the "Brother" might be spoken in a social sense, or was a name bestowed upon the gentleman in baptism.

"He's a missionary from abroad, or something of that sort, sir, and has come to see what he can do towards converting us."

"Oh, indeed," said Lionel, his lip curling with a smile. The man's face had not taken his fancy. "Honest missionaries need not run away to avoid meeting people, Mrs. Duff."

"He have queer eyes," responded Mrs. Duff. "Perhaps that's a reason he mayn't like to look gentlefolk in the face, sir."

"Where does he come from?"

"Well, now, sir, I did hear," replied Mrs. Duff, putting on her considering cap again. "It were some religious place, sir, that's talked of a good deal in the Bible. Jericho, were it? No. It began with a J, though. Oh, I have it, sir! It were Jerusalem. He comes all the way from Jerusalem."

"Where is he lodging?" continued Lionel.

"He have been lodging at the George and Dragon, sir. But to-day he's gone and took that spare bedroom as the Peckabys have wanted to let since their custom fell off."

"He means to make a stay, then?"

"It looks like it, sir. Susan Peckaby were in here half-an-hour ago, a-buying new ribbons for a cap, all agog with it. He's going to hold forth in their shop, she says, and see how many of the parish he can turn into saints. I says it won't be a bad 'turn,' sir, if it keeps the men from the beerhouses."

Lionel laughed as he went on. He supposed it was a new move-

ment that would have its brief day and then be over, leaving results neither good nor bad behind it; and he dismissed the man from his memory.

He walked on, in the elasticity of his youth and health. All nature seemed to be smiling around him. Lionel felt happier than he had done for months and months. Had the image of Lucy Tempest anything to do with this? No—nothing. He had not yet grown to love Lucy in that idolizing manner that must bring her ever present to him. He was thinking of the change in his own fortunes. He cast his eyes around to right and left, and they rested on his own domains—domains which had for a time been wrested from him; and as his quick steps rang on the frosty road, his heart went up in thankfulness to the Giver of all good.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BACK AGAIN.

It was late when Lionel reached Verner's Pride. Night had set in, and dinner was waiting.

After it was over, Lionel drew his chair in front of the fire, and fell into a train of thought, leaving the wine untouched. Quite half-an-hour had he thus sat, when the entrance of Tynn aroused him. He poured out a glass of wine, and raised it to his lips. Tynn bore a note on a silver waiter.

"Matiss's boy has just brought it, sir. He is waiting to know whether there's any answer."

Lionel opened the note, and was reading it, when a sound of carriage wheels came rattling on to the terrace, passed the windows, and stopped at the hall door. "Who can be paying me a visit to-night, I wonder?" cried he. "Go and see, Tynn."

"It sounds like one of them rattling one-horse flies from the railway station," was Tynn's comment to his master, as he left the room.

Whoever it might be, they appeared pretty long in entering, and Lionel, greatly to his surprise, heard a sound as of much luggage being deposited in the hall. He was on the point of going out to see, when the door opened, and a lovely vision glided forward. A young fair face and form, clothed in deep mourning, with a shower of golden curls shading her damask cheeks. For one single moment, Lionel was lost in the beauty of the apparition. Then he recognized her, before Tynn's announcement was heard; and his heart leaped as if it would burst its bounds.

"Mrs. Massingbird, sir."

Leaped within him fast and furiously. His pulses throbbed, his blood coursed on, and his face went hot and cold with its emotion. Had he been fondly persuading himself, during the past months, that she was forgotten? Truly the present moment rudely undeceived him.

Tynn shut the door, leaving them alone. Lionel was not so agitated as to forget the courtesies of life. He shook hands with her, and, in the impulse of the moment, called her Sibylla: and then bit his tongue for doing so.

She burst into tears. There, as he held her hand. She lifted her lovely face to him with a yearning, pleading look. "Oh, Lionel!—you will give me a home, won't you?"

What was he to say? He could not, in that first instant, abruptly say to her—No, you cannot have a home here. Lionel could not hurt the feelings of any one. "Sit down, Mrs. Massingbird," he gently said, drawing an easy-chair to the fire. "You have taken me quite by surprise. When did you land?"

She threw off her bonnet, shook back those golden curls, and sat down in the chair, a large heavy shawl on her shoulders. "I will not take it off yet," she said plaintively. "I am very cold."

She shivered slightly. Lionel drew her chair yet nearer the fire, and brought a footstool for her feet; repeating his question as he did so.

"We reached Liverpool late yesterday, and I started for home this morning," she answered, her eyelashes wet still, as she gazed into the fire. "What a miserable journey it has been!" she added, turning to Lionel. "A miserable voyage out; a miserable ending!"

"Are you aware of the changes that have taken place since you left?" he asked. "Your aunt is dead."

"Yes, I heard it at the station," she answered. "That lame porter came up, and his first news to me was, that Mrs. Verner was dead. What a greeting! I was coming home here to live with her."

"You could not have received my letter. One I wrote at the request of Mrs. Verner in answer to yours."

"I was tired of waiting. I was sick for home. And one day, when I had been crying more than usual, Mrs. Eyre said to me, that if I were so anxious to go, there need be no difficulty about the passage-money: they would advance me any amount I might require. Oh, I was so glad! I came away by the next ship."

"Why did you not write, saying that you were coming?"

"I did not think it mattered—and I knew I had this home to come to. If I had had to go to my old home at papa's, then I should have written. I should have seemed like an intruder

arriving at their house, and have deemed it necessary to warn them of it."

"You heard in Australia of Mr. Verner's death, I presume?"

"I heard of that, and that my husband had inherited Verner's Pride. The news came out just before I sailed for home. Of course I thought I had a right to come to this home, though he was dead. I suppose it is yours now?"

"Yes."

"Who lives here?"

"Only myself."

"Have I a right to live here—as Frederick's widow?" she continued, lifting her large blue eyes anxiously to Lionel. "I mean, would the law give it me?"

"No," he replied in a low tone. He felt that the truth must be told to her without disguise. She was placing both him and herself in an embarrassing situation.

"Was there any money left to me!—or to Frederick?"

"None to you. Verner's Pride was left to your husband. But at his demise it came to me."

"Did my aunt leave me nothing?"

"She had nothing to leave, Mrs. Massingbird. The settlement which Mr. Verner executed on her when they married was only for her life. It lapsed to the Verner's Pride revenues when she died."

"Then I am left without a shilling, at the mercy of the world!"

Lionel felt for her—felt for her rather more than was safe. "The revenues of the estate, during the short time that elapsed between Mr. Verner's death and your husband's, are undoubtedly yours, Mrs. Massingbird," he said. "I will see Matiss about it, and they shall be paid over."

"Thank you. And, until then, I may stay here?"

Lionel was nonplused. It is not a pleasant thing to tell a lady that she must quit your house, in which, like a stray lamb, she has taken refuge. Even though it be, for her own fair sake, expedient that she should go.

"I am here alone," said Lionel, after a pause. "Your temporary home had better be with your sisters."

"No, that it never shall," returned Sibylla, hastily. "I will never go home to them, now papa's away. Why did he leave Deerham? They told me at the station that he was gone, and Jan was doctor now."

"Dr. West is travelling on the Continent, as medical attendant and companion to a nobleman. At least—I think I heard it was a nobleman," continued Lionel. "I am really not sure."

"My sisters might reproach me with coming home to be kept. Oh, Lionel! don't turn me out! Let me stay until I can see what

is to be done for me. I shall not harm you. It would have been all mine had Frederick lived."

He did not know what to do. Every moment there seemed to be less chance that she would leave the house. A bright thought darted into his mind. It was, that he would get his mother or Decima to come and stay with him for a time.

"What would you like to take?" he inquired. "Mrs. Tynn will get you anything you wish. I——"

"Nothing yet," she interrupted. "I could not eat anything; I am too unhappy. I will take some tea presently, but not until I am warmer. I am very cold."

She cowered over the fire again, shivering much. Lionel, saying he had a note to write, sat down at a distant table. He penned a few hasty lines to his mother, telling her that Mrs. Massingbird had arrived, under the impression that she was coming to Mrs. Verner, and that he could not well turn her out again that night, fatigued and poorly as she appeared to be. He begged his mother to come to him for a day or two, in the emergency; or to send Decima.

A conviction ran through Lionel's mind, whilst he wrote it, that his mother would not come: he doubted even whether she would allow Decima to come. He drove the thought from him; but the impression remained. Carrying the note out of the room when written, he despatched it to Deerham Court by a mounted groom.

When he returned, Sibylla was in the same attitude, shivering over the fire. Unnaturally cold she appeared to be, and yet her cheeks were brilliant, as with a touch of fever.

"I fear you have caught cold on your journey to-day," he said.

"I don't think so," she answered. "I am cold from nervousness. I turned cold at the station when they told me that my aunt was dead, and I have been shivering ever since. Never mind me; it will go off presently."

Lionel drew a chair to the other side of the fire, regarding her with compassion. He could have found it in his heart to take her to his arms, and warm her there.

"What was that about a codicil?" she suddenly asked him. "When my aunt wrote to me upon Mr. Verner's death, she said that a codicil had been lost: or that, otherwise, the estate would have been yours."

Lionel explained it to her. Concealing nothing.

"Then—if that codicil had been forthcoming, Frederick's share would have been only five hundred pounds?"

"That is all."

"It was very little to leave him," she musingly rejoined.

"And still less to leave me, considering my near relationship—my nearer claims. When the codicil could not be found, the

will had to be acted upon: and five hundred pounds was all it gave me."

"Has the codicil never been found?"

"Never."

"How very strange! What became of it, do you think?"

"I wish I could tell," replied Lionel. "Although Verner's Pride has come to me without it, it would be satisfactory to solve the mystery."

Sibylla looked round cautiously, and sank her voice. "Could Tynn or his wife have done anything with it? You say they were present when it was signed."

"Most decidedly they did not. Both of them were anxious that I should succeed."

"It is so strange! That a paper locked up in a desk should disappear of its own accord! The moths could not have got in and eaten it?"

"Scarcely," smiled Lionel. "The day before your aunt died, she——"

"Don't talk of that," interrupted Mrs. Massingbird. "I will hear about her death to-morrow. I shall be ill, if I cry much to-night."

She sank into silence, and Lionel did not interrupt it. It continued, until his quick ears caught the sound of the groom's return. The man rode his horse round to the stables at once. Presently Tynn came in with Lady Verner's answer. A few lines, written hastily with a pencil, declined his request.

As he was reading the words, Sibylla rose.

"I am warm now," she said. "I should like to go upstairs and take this heavy shawl off."

Lionel rang the bell for Mrs. Tynn. And Sibylla left the room with her.

"I'll get her sisters here!" he suddenly exclaimed, the thought darting into his mind. "They will be the proper persons to explain to her the inexpediency of her remaining here. Poor girl! she is unable to think of it in her fatigue and grief."

Without a second thought, he took up his hat, and went down himself to Dr. West's with strides as long as Jan's. Entering the general sitting-room without ceremony, his eyes fell upon a supper-table and Master Cheese; the latter regaling himself upon apple-puffs to his heart's content.

"Where are the Miss Wests?" asked Lionel.

"Gone to a party," responded the young gentleman, as soon as he could get his mouth sufficiently empty to speak.

"Where to?"

"To Heartbury, sir. It's a ball at old Thingumtight's, the doctor's. They have gone off in grey gauze, with white flowers hanging

from their curls, and they call that mourning. The fly is to bring them back at two in the morning. They left these apple-puffs for me and Jan. Jan said he should not want any; so I have his share and mine too?"

And Master Cheese appeared to be enjoying both shares excessively. Lionel left him to it, and went thoughtfully back to Verner's Pride.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MOMENT'S DELIRIUM.

THE dining-room looked a picture of comfort: and Lionel thought so as he entered. A blaze of light and warmth burst upon him. A well-spread tea-table was there, with cold meat, game and other things, at one end of it. Standing before the fire, her young, slender form habited in its black robes, was Sibylla. No one, looking at her would have believed her to be a widow: partly from her youth, partly that she did not wear the widow's dress. Her head was uncovered, and her fair curls fell on her brilliant cheeks. It has been mentioned that her chief charm lay in her complexion: seen by candle-light, flushed as she was now, she was inexpressibly beautiful. A dangerous hour; a perilous situation for the still wounded heart of Lionel Verner.

The bright flush was the result of excitement, of some degree of inward fever. Let us allow that it was a trying time for her. She had arrived to find Mrs. Verner dead, her father absent: she had arrived to find that no provision had been made for her by Mr. Verner's will, as the widow of Frederick Massingbird. Frederick's having succeeded to the inheritance debarred her even of the five hundred pounds. It is true there would be the rents, received for the short time it had been his. There was no doubt that Sibylla, throughout the long voyage, had cherished the prospect of finding a home at Verner's Pride. If her husband had lived, it would have been wholly hers; she appeared still to possess a right in it; and she never gave a thought to the possibility that her aunt would not welcome her to it. But—the voyage ended, the home gained—what did she find? That Mrs. Verner was no longer at Verner's Pride, to press the kiss of welcome upon her lips: a few feet of earth was all her home now.

It was a terrible disappointment. There could be no doubt of that. And another disappointment was, to find Dr. West away. Sibylla's sisters had been at times over-strict with her, much as they loved her, and the vision of returning to her old home, to

them, was one of bitterness. So bitter, in fact, that she would not glance at its possibility.

Fatigued, low-spirited, feverishly perplexed, Sibylla did not know what she could do. She was not in a state that night to give much care to the future. All she hoped was, to stay in that haven until something else could be arranged for her. Let us give her her due. Naturally careless of the punctilios of life, it never occurred to her that it might not be the precise thing for her to remain, young as she was, the sole guest of Lionel Verner. Her voyage out, her residence in that very unconventional place, Melbourne, the waves and storms which had gone over her there in more ways than one, the voyage back again alone, all had tended to give Sibylla Massingbird an independence of thought; a contempt for the rules and regulations, the little points of etiquette obtaining in civilized society. She really thought no more harm of staying at Verner's Pride with Lionel, than she would have thought it had old Mr. Verner been its master. The eyelashes, resting on her hot cheeks, were wet, as she turned when Lionel entered.

"Have you taken anything, Mrs. Massingbird?"

"No."

"But you should have done so," he remonstrated, his tone one of extreme kindness.

"I did not observe that tea waited," she replied, the well-spread table catching her eye for the first time. "I have been thinking."

He placed a chair for her before the tea-tray, and she sat down. "Am I to preside?" she asked.

"If you will. If you are not too tired."

"Who makes tea for you in general?" she continued.

"They send it in, made."

Sibylla busied herself with the tea, in a languid sort of manner. In vain Lionel pressed her to eat. She could touch nothing. She took up a piece of rolled bread and butter, but left it.

"You must have dined on the road, Mrs. Massingbird?" he said with a smile.

"I? I have not taken anything all day. I kept thinking 'I shall get to Verner's Pride in time for dinner.' But the train arrived later than I anticipated; and when I got here my aunt was gone."

Sibylla bent her head, as if playing with her tea-spoon. Lionel noticed the falling tears.

"Did you wonder where I was going just now, when I went out?"

"I did not know you had been out," replied Sibylla.

"I went to see your sisters. I thought it would be better for them to come here. Unfortunately, I found them gone out; and young Cheese says they will not be home until two in the morning."

"Why, where can they be gone to?" cried Sibylla, aroused to interest. It was so unusual for the Miss Wests to be out late.

"To some gathering at Heartbury. Cheese was eating apple-puffs with unlimited satisfaction."

Apple-puffs in connection with Master Cheese called up a faint smile to Sibylla's face. She pushed her chair from the table, turning it towards the fire.

"But you surely have not finished, Mrs. Massingbird?"

"Yes, thank you. I have taken some tea. I cannot eat anything."

Lionel rang, and the things were removed. Sibylla was standing before the mantel-piece when they were left alone, unconsciously looking at herself in the glass. Lionel stood near her.

"I have no widow's cap," she exclaimed, turning to him, the thought appearing suddenly to strike her. "I had two or three curious things made, that they called widow's caps in Melbourne, but they were spoilt on the voyage."

"You have seen some trouble since you went out," Lionel observed.

"Yes, I have. It was an ill-starred voyage. It has been ill-starred from the beginning to the end; all of it together."

"The voyage has, you mean?"

"I mean more than the voyage," she replied. But her tone did not invite further question.

"Did you succeed in getting particulars of John's fate?"

"No. Captain Cannonby promised to make inquiries, but we had not heard from him before I came away. I wish we could have found Luke Roy."

"Did you not find him?"

"We heard of him from the Eyres—the friends I was staying with. It was so singular," she continued, with some animation in her tone. "Luke Roy came to Melbourne after John was killed, and fell in with the Eyres. He told them about John: little thinking that I and Frederick should meet the Eyres afterwards. John died from a shot."

"From a shot!" involuntarily exclaimed Lionel.

"He and Luke were coming down to Melbourne from—where was it?—the Bendigo Diggings, I think; but I heard so much of the different names, that I am apt to confound one with another. John had a great deal of gold on him in a belt round his waist, and Luke supposes that it got known. John was attacked as they were sleeping by night in the open air, beaten, and shot. It was the shot that killed him."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Lionel, his eyes fixed on vacancy, mentally beholding John Massingbird. "And they robbed him!"

"They had robbed him of all. Not a particle of gold was left

upon him. And the report sent home by Luke, that the gold and the men were taken, proved to be a mistake. Luke came on afterwards to Melbourne, and tried to discover the men; but he could not. It was this striving at discovery which brought him into contact with Mr. Eyre. After we reached Melbourne, and I became acquainted with the Eyres, they did all they could to find out Luke, but were unsuccessful."

"What had become of him?"

"They could not think. The last time Mr. Eyre saw him, Luke said he thought he had obtained a clue to the men who killed John. He promised to go back the following day and tell Mr. Eyre more about it. But he did not. And they never saw him afterwards. Mrs. Eyre used to say to me that she sincerely trusted no harm had come to Luke."

"Harm in what way?" asked Lionel.

"She thought—but she would say that it was a foolish thought—if Luke should have found the men, and been sufficiently imprudent to allow them to know that he recognized them, they might have worked him some ill. Perhaps killed him."

Sibylla spoke the last words in a low tone. She was standing very still; her hands lightly resting before her, one upon another. How Lionel's heart was beating as he gazed at her, he alone knew. She was once again the Sibylla of past days. He forgot that she was the widow of another; that she had left him for that other of her own free will. All his past resentment faded in that moment: nothing was present to him but his love, and Sibylla with her fascinating beauty.

"You are thinner than when you left home," he remarked.

"I grew thin with vexation; with grief. He ought not to have taken me."

The concluding sentence was spoken in strangely resentful tones. It surprised Lionel. "Who ought not to have taken you?—taken you where?" he asked, really not understanding her.

"He. Frederick Massingbird. He might have known what a place Melbourne was. It is not fit for a lady. We had lodgings in a wooden house, near a spot that used to be called Canvas Town. The place was crowded with people."

"But surely there are decent hotels in Melbourne?"

"All I know is, he did not take me to one. He inquired at one or two, but they were full; and then some one recommended him to get a lodging. It was not right. He might have gone to it himself, but he had me with him. He lost his desk, you know."

"I heard so," replied Lionel.

"And I suppose that frightened him. Everything was in the desk: money and letters of credit. He had a few bank-notes only,

left in his pocket-book. It was never recovered. I owe my passage-money home, and I believe Captain Cannonby supplied him with funds—which of course ought to be repaid. He took to drinking brandy," she continued.

"I am much surprised to hear it."

"Some fever came on. I don't know whether he caught it, or whether it came to him naturally. It was a sort of intermittent fever. At times he was very low with it, and then it was that he would drink brandy. Only fancy what my position was!" she added, her face and voice full of pain. "He, not always himself; and I, out there in that wretched place alone. I went down on my knees to him one day, and begged him to send me back to England."

"Sibylla!"

He was unconscious that he called her by the old familiar name. He was wishing he could have shielded her from all this. Painful as the retrospect might be to her, the recital was far more painful to him.

"After that, we met Captain Cannonby. I did not much like him, but he was kind to us. He got us to change to an hotel, made them find room for us, and then introduced me to the Eyres. Afterwards, he and Fred started from Melbourne, and I went to stay at the Eyres'."

Lionel did not interrupt her. She had made a pause, her eyes fixed on the fire.

"A day or two, and Captain Cannonby came back, and said that my husband was dead. I was not very much surprised. I thought he would not live when he left me: he had death written in his face. And so, I am alone in the world."

She raised her large blue eyes, swimming in tears, to Lionel. It completely disarmed him. He forgot all his prudence, all his caution; he forgot things that it was incumbent upon him to remember; and, as many another has done before him, older and wiser than Lionel Verner, he suffered a moment's impassioned impulse to fix the destiny of a life.

"Not alone from henceforth, Sibylla," he murmured, bending towards her in agitation, his lips apart, his breath coming fast, his cheeks scarlet. "Let me be your protector. I love you more fondly than I have ever done."

She was quite unprepared for the avowal. It may be, that she did not know what to make of it—how to understand it. She stepped back, her eyes strained on him inquiringly, her face turning to pallor. Lionel threw his arms round her, drew her to him, and sheltered her on his breast: as if he would ward off ill from her for ever.

"Be my wife," he fondly whispered, his voice trembling with its own tenderness. "My darling, let this home be yours! Nothing shall part us more."

She burst into tears, raised herself, and looked at him. "You cannot mean it? After behaving to you as I did, can you love me still?"

"I love you better than ever," he answered, his voice becoming hoarse with emotion. "I have been striving to forget you ever since that cruel time; and not until to-night did I know how utterly futile has been the attempt. You will let me love you! you will help me to blot out its remembrance!"

She drew a long deep sigh, as one who is relieved from some wearing pain, and laid her head down again as he had placed it. "I can love you better than I loved him," she breathed in a whisper.

"Sibylla, why did you leave me? Why did you marry him?"

"Oh, Lionel, don't reproach me!—don't reproach me!" she answered, bursting into tears. "Papa made me. He did, indeed."

"*He* made you! Dr. West?"

"I liked Frederick a little. Yes, I did; I will not deny it. And oh, how he loved me! All the while, Lionel, that you hovered near me—never speaking, never saying that you loved—he told me of it incessantly."

"Stay, Sibylla. You could not have mistaken me."

"True. Yours was silent love; his was urgent. When it came to a decision, and he asked me to marry him, and to go out to Australia, then papa interfered. He suspected that I cared for you—that you cared for me; and he—he——"

Sibylla stopped and hesitated.

"Must I tell you all?" she asked. "Will you never, never repeat it to papa, or reproach him? Will you let it remain a secret between us?"

"I will, Sibylla. I will never speak upon the point to Dr. West."

"Papa said that I must choose Frederick Massingbird. He told me that Verner's Pride was left to Frederick, and he ordered me to marry him. He did not say how he knew it—how he heard it; he only said that it was so. He affirmed that you were cut off with nothing, or next to nothing; that you would not be able to take a wife for years—perhaps never. And I weakly yielded."

A strangely stern expression had darkened Lionel's face. Sibylla saw it, and wrung her hands.

"Oh, don't blame me!—don't blame me more than you can help! I know how weak, how wrong it was; but you cannot tell how utterly obedient we have always been to papa."

"I do not blame you, my dearest."

"I have been rightly served," she said, the tears streaming down. "I married him, pressed to it by my father, that I might share in Verner's Pride; and, before the news came out that Verner's Pride was ours, he was dead. It had lapsed to you, whom I rejected! Lionel, I never supposed that you would cast another thought to me; but, many a time have I felt that I should like to kneel and ask your forgiveness."

He bent his head, fondly kissing her. "We will forget it together, Sibylla."

A sudden thought appeared to strike her, called forth, no doubt, by this new state of things, and her face turned crimson as she looked at Lionel.

"Ought I to remain here now?"

"You cannot well do anything else, as it is so late," he answered. "Allow Verner's Pride to afford you an asylum for the present, until you can make arrangements to remove to some temporary home. Mrs. Tynn will make you comfortable. I shall be, during the time, my mother's guest."

"What is the time now?" asked Sibylla.

"Nearly ten. And, I dare say you are tired. I will not be selfish enough to keep you up," he added, preparing to depart. "Good night, my dearest."

She burst into fresh tears, and clung to his hand. "I shall think it must be a dream as soon as you leave me. You will be sure to come back and see me to-morrow?"

"Come back—ay!" he said, with a smile. "Verner's Pride never contained the magnet for me that it contains now."

He gave a few brief orders to Mrs. Tynn and to his own servant, and left the house. Neither afraid of ghosts nor thieves, he took the road which led by the Willow Pond. It was a fine, cold night; his mind was unsettled, his blood was heated, and the lonely route appeared to him preferable to the one through the village.

As he passed the Willow Pond with a quick step, he caught a glimpse of some figure bending over it, as if it were looking for something in the water, or else about to take a leap in. Remembering the fate of Rachel, and not wishing to have a second catastrophe of the same nature on his estate, Lionel strode towards the figure and caught it by the arm. The head was flung upwards at the touch, and Lionel recognized Robin Frost.

"Robin! what do you do here?" he questioned, his tone somewhat severe in spite of its kindness.

"No harm," answered the man. "There be times, Mr. Lionel, when I am forced to come. If I am in my bed, and the thought comes over me that I may see her if I only stay long enough upon the brink of this here water, which was her ending, I'm obliged to

get up and come here. There are nights, sir, when I have stood here from sunset to sunrise."

"But you never have seen her, Robin?" returned Lionel, humouring his grief.

"No; never. But it's no reason why I never may. Folks say there be some of the dead that comes again, sir—not all."

"And if you did see her, what end would it answer?"

"She'd tell me who the wicked one was that put her into it," returned Robin, in a whisper; and there was something so wild in the man's tone as to make Lionel doubt his sanity. "Many a time do I hear her voice calling to me. It comes at all hours, abroad and at home, in the full sunshine, and in the dark night. 'Robin!' it says, 'Robin!' But it never says nothing more."

Lionel laid his hand on the man's shoulder, and drew him along. "I am going your way, Robin; let us walk together."

Robin made no resistance. Lionel saw him turn to his home, and then proceeded to his mother's. Lady Verner had retired for the night. Decima and Lucy were about to retire. They looked inexpressibly surprised at Lionel's entrance.

"I have come on a visit, Decima," began he, speaking gaily. "Can you take me in?"

She did not understand him, and Lionel saw by the expression of her face that Lady Verner had not made public the contents of his note to her: he saw that they were ignorant of the return of Sibylla. The fact that they were so, seemed to fall upon his spirit as a refreshing dew. Why it should do so, he did not seek to analyze: and he was all too conscious that he dared not.

"A friend has come unexpectedly on a visit, and taken possession of Verner's Pride," he pursued. "I have lent it for a time."

"Lent it all?" exclaimed wondering Decima.

"Lent it all. You will make room for me, won't you?"

"To be sure," said Decima, puzzled more than she could express. "But was there no room left for you?"

"No," answered Lionel.

"What very unconscionable people they must be, to invade you in such numbers! You can have your old chamber, Lionel. But I will just go and speak to Catherine."

She hastened from the room. Lionel stood before the fire, positively turning his back upon Lucy Tempest. Was his conscience already smiting him? Lucy, who had stood by the table, bedcandle in hand, stepped forward and held out the other hand to Lionel.

"May I wish you good night?" she said.

"Good night," he answered, shaking her hand. "How is your cold?"

"Oh! it is so much better!" she replied with animation. "All the threatened soreness is gone. I shall be well by to-morrow. Lady Verner said I ought to have gone to bed early, but I felt too well to do so. I knew Jan's advice would be good."

She left him, and Lionel leaned his elbow on the mantel-piece, his brow contracting as that of one in unpleasant thought. Was he recalling the manner in which he had taken leave of Lucy earlier in the day?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

NEWS FOR LADY VERNER.

If he did not recall it then, he recalled it later: when he was turning and tossing from side to side upon his bed. His conscience was smiting him: smiting him from more points than one. Carried away by the impulse of the moment, he had spoken words that night, in his passion, which might not be recalled; and now that leisure for reflection had come, he could not conceal from himself that he had been too hasty. Lionel Verner was one who possessed excessive conscientiousness. Even as a boy, had impetuosity led him into a fault—as it often did—his silent repentance would be always keenly real; more so than the case deserved. It was so now. He loved Sibylla: there had been no mistake there: but it is certain that the unexpected delight of meeting her, her presence palpably before him in all its beauty, her manifested sorrow and grief, her lonely, unprotected position, all had worked upon his heart and mind, and imparted to his love a false intensity. However the agitation of the moment may have caused him to fancy it, he did *not* love Sibylla as he had loved her of old; else why should the image of Lucy Tempest present itself to him surrounded by a halo of regret? The point is as unpleasant for us to touch upon, as it was to Lionel to think of: but the fact was all too palpable, and cannot be suppressed. He did love Sibylla: nevertheless there obtruded the unwelcome reflection that, in asking her to be his wife, he had been hasty; that it had been better had he taken time for consideration. He almost doubted whether Lucy would not have been more acceptable to him: not loved *yet* so much as Sibylla, but better suited to him in all other ways: worse than this, he doubted whether he had not in honour bound himself tacitly to Lucy that very day.

The fit of repentance was upon him, and he tossed and turned from side to side upon his uneasy bed. But, toss and turn as he would, he could not undo his night's work. There remained nothing

for him but to carry it out, and make the best of it; and he strove to deceive his conscience with the hope that Lucy Tempest, in her girlish innocence, had not understood his hinted allusions to her becoming his wife: that she had looked upon his caresses as but trifling pastime, such as he might offer to a child. Most unjustifiable he now felt those hints, those acts to have been, and his brow grew red with shame at their recollection. One thing he did hope, hope sincerely—that Lucy did not care for him. That she liked him very much, that she had been on most confidential terms with him, he knew: but he did hope her liking went no deeper. Strange sophistry! how it will deceive the human heart! how prone we are to admit it! Lionel was honest enough in his hope now: but, not many hours before, he had been hugging his heart with the delusion that Lucy loved him.

Towards morning he dropped into an uneasy sleep. He awoke later than his usual hour from a dream of Frederick Massingbird. Dreams play us strange fantasies. Lionel's had taken him to that past evening, prior to Frederick Massingbird's marriage, when he had sought him in his chamber, to offer a word of warning against the union. He seemed to be living the interview over again, and the first words when he awoke, rushing over his brain with minute and unpleasant reality, were those he had himself spoken in reference to Sibylla:—"Were she free as air this moment, were she to come to my feet, and say 'Let me be your wife,' I should tell her that the whole world was before her to choose from, myself excepted. She can never again be anything to me."

Brave words: fully believed in when they were spoken: but what did Lionel think of them now?

He went down to breakfast. He was rather late, and found they had assembled. Lady Verner, who had just heard for the first time of Lionel's presence in the house, made no secret now of Lionel's note to her. Therefore Decima and Lucy knew that the "invasion" of Verner's Pride had been caused by Mrs. Massingbird.

She—Lady Verner—scarcely gave herself time to greet Lionel before she commenced upon it. She did not conceal, or seek to conceal, her sentiments—either of Sibylla herself, or of the step she had taken. And Lionel had the pleasure of hearing his intended bride alluded to in a manner that was not altogether complimentary.

He could not prevent it. He could not take upon himself to defend Sibylla, and say, "Do you know that you are speaking of my future wife!" No, for Lucy Tempest was there. Not in her presence had he the courage to bring home to himself his own dishonour: to avow that, after wooing her (it was very like it), he had turned round and asked another to marry him. The morning

sun shone into the room upon the snowy cloth, upon the silver breakfast-service, upon the exquisite porcelain cups, upon those seated round the table. Decima sat opposite to Lady Verner, Lionel and Lucy were face to face on either side. The walls exhibited a few choice paintings; the room and its appurtenances were in excellent taste. Lady Verner liked things that pleased the eye. That silver service had been a recent present of Lionel's, who, since his accession, had delighted in showering elegancies and comforts upon his mother.

"What could have induced her ever to think of taking up her residence at Verner's Pride on her return?" reiterated Lady Verner to Lionel.

"She believed she was coming to her aunt. It was only at the station, here, that she learnt Mrs. Verner was dead."

"She did learn it there?"

"Yes. She learnt it there."

"And she could come to Verner's Pride *after* that? knowing that you, and you alone, were its master?"

Lionel toyed with his coffee-cup. He wished his mother would spare her remarks.

"She was so fatigued, so low-spirited, that I believe she was scarcely conscious where she drove to," he observed. "I am certain that the idea of there being any impropriety in it never once crossed her mind."

Lady Verner drew her shawl around her with a peculiar movement. If ever action expressed scorn, that one did;—scorn of Sibylla, scorn of her conduct, scorn of Lionel's credulity in believing in her. Lionel read it all. Happening to glance across the table, he caught the eyes of Lucy Tempest fixed upon him with an expression of wonder. Wonder at what? At his believing in Sibylla? It might be. With all Lucy's straightforwardness, she would have been one of the last to storm Lionel's abode, and take refuge in it. A retort, defending Sibylla, had been upon Lionel's tongue, but that gaze stopped it.

"How long does she purpose honouring Verner's Pride with her presence, and keeping you out of it!" resumed Lady Verner.

"I do not know what her plans for the present may be," he answered, his cheek burning at the thought of the avowal he had to make—that her future plans would be contingent upon his. Not the least painful of the results which Lionel's haste had brought in its train was the knowledge of the shock it would prove to his mother, whom he so loved and reverenced. Why had he not thought of it at the time?

Breakfast over, Lionel went out, a very coward. A coward, in so far that he had shrunk from making yet the confession. He was

aware that it ought to be done. The presence of Decima and Lucy Tempest had been his mental excuse for putting off the unwelcome task.

But a better frame of mind came over him ere he had gone many paces from the door; better, at any rate, as regarded the cowardice.

"A Verner never yet shrank from his duty," was his comment, as he bent his steps back again. "Am I turning renegade?"

He went straight up to Lady Verner, and asked her to grant him a minute's private interview. They had breakfasted in the room which formed the ante-room to the drawing-room: it was their usual morning-room. Lady Verner answered her son by stepping into the drawing-room.

He followed her and closed the door. The fire was only just lighted, scarcely giving out any warmth. She slightly shivered, and requested him to stir it. He did so mechanically; wholly absorbed in the revelation he had to impart. He remembered how she had once fainted at nearly the same revelation.

"Mother, I have a communication to make to you," he began with desperate energy. "And I don't know how to do it. It will pain you greatly. Nothing, that I can think of, or imagine, would cause you so much pain."

Lady Verner seated herself in her low violet-velvet chair, and looked composedly at Lionel. She did not dread the communication very much. He was secure of Verner's Pride; what could there be that she need fear? She no more cast a glance to the possibility of his marrying the widow of Frederick Massingbird, than she would have done to his marrying that gentleman's wife. Buried in this half-security, the shock must be all the greater.

"I am about to marry," said Lionel, plunging into the news headlong. "And I fear that you will not approve my choice. Nay, I know you will not."

A foreshadowing of the truth came across her then. She grew deadly pale, and put up her hands, as if to ward off the blow. "Oh, Lionel! don't say it! don't say it!" she implored. "I never can receive her."

"Yes, you will, mother," he whispered, his own face pale too, his tone one of painful entreaty. "You will receive her for my sake."

"Is it—*she?*"

The aversion with which the name was avoided was unmistakable. Lionel only nodded a grave affirmative.

"Have you engaged yourself to her?"

"I have. Last night."

"Were you mad?" she asked in a whisper.

"Stay, mother. When you were speaking against Sibylla at

breakfast, I refrained from interfering, for you did not then know that defence of her was my duty. Will you forgive me for reminding you that I cannot permit it to be continued, even by you?"

"But, do you forget that it is not a respectable alliance for you?" resumed Lady Verner. "No, not even respectable."

"I cannot listen to this; I pray you cease!" he broke forth, a blaze of anger lighting his face. "Have you forgotten of whom you are speaking, mother? Not respectable!"

"I say that it is not a respectable alliance for you—Lionel Verner," she persisted. "An obscure surgeon's daughter, he not of too good repute, who has been out to the end of the world, and found her way back alone, a widow, is *not* a desirable alliance for a Verner. It would not be desirable for Jan; it is terrible for you?"

"We shall not agree upon this," said Lionel, preparing to take his departure. "I have acquainted you, mother, and I have no more to say. Except to urge—if I may do so—that you will learn to speak of Sibylla with courtesy, remembering that she will shortly be my wife."

Lady Verner caught his hand as he was retreating.

"Lionel, my son, tell me how you came to do it," she wailed. "You cannot *love* her! the wife, the widow of another man! It must have been the work of a moment's folly. Perhaps she drew you into it!"

The suggestion, "the work of a moment's folly," was so very close a representation of what it had been, of what Lionel was beginning to see it to have been now, that the rest of the speech was lost to him in the echo of that one sentence. Somehow, he did not care to refute it.

"She will be my wife, honoured and respected," was all he answered, as he quitted the room.

Lady Verner followed him. He went straight out, and she saw him walk hastily across the courtyard. She wrung her hands, and broke into a storm of despair, ignoring the presence of Decima and Lucy Tempest.

"I had far rather that she had stabbed him!"

She was pointing to Lionel, then passing through the front gates. "I speak of *him*," she answered: "my darling; my pride; my much-loved son. That woman has worked his ruin."

Decima verily thought her mother must be wandering. Lucy could only gaze at Lady Verner in consternation.

"What woman?" repeated Decima.

"*She*. She who has been Lionel's bane. She who came and thrust herself into his home last night in her unseemly conduct. What passed between them, Heaven knows; but she has contrived to cajole him out of a promise to marry her."

Decima's pale cheek turned to a burning red. She was afraid to ask questions.

"Oh, mamma! it cannot be!" was all she uttered.

"It *is*, Decima. I told Lionel that he could not love *her*, who had been the wife of another man: and he did not refute it. I told him she must have drawn him into it; and that he left unanswered. He replied that she would be his wife, and must so be honoured. Drawn in to marry her! one who is so utterly unworthy of him! whom he does not even love! Oh, Lionel, my son, my son!"

In their own grievous sorrow they noticed not the face of Lucy Tempest, or what they might have read there.

That same day Sibylla removed to the house of her sisters, leaving Verner's Pride to its master.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BROTHER JARRUM.

By the light of a single tallow candle flaring on a shelf in Peckaby's shop, consecrated in more prosperous days to wares, but bare now, a large collected assemblage were regarding each other with looks of eager interest. There could not have been less than thirty present, all crammed together in that space of a few feet square. The first-comers had taken their seats on the counters; the others stood as they could. Two or three men, just returned from their day's labour, were there; but the crowd was chiefly composed of the weaker sex.

The attention of these people was concentrated on a little man who faced them, leaning against the wall at the back of the shop, and holding forth in loud, persuasive tones. If you object to the term "holding forth," you must blame Mrs. Duff: it is borrowed from her. She informed us, you may remember, that the stranger who met, and appeared to avoid, Lionel Verner, was no other than a "missionary from Jerusalem," seized with anxiety for the souls of Deerham, and about to do what he could to convert them—"Brother Jarrum."

Brother Jarrum had entered upon his work conjointly with his entry upon Peckaby's spare bedroom. He held nightly meetings in Peckaby's shop, and the news of his fame was spreading. Women of all ages flocked to hear him—you know how impressionable they have the reputation of being. A sprinkling of men followed out of curiosity, or idleness, or from a propensity to ridicule. Had Brother Jarrum proved to be a real missionary from Jerusalem—though, so far as my knowledge goes, such messengers from that city are not common—genuinely desirous of converting them from

wrath to grace, I fear his audience would, after the first night or two, have fallen off considerably. *This* missionary, however, contrived both to keep his audience and to increase it; his promises partaking more of a mundane nature than do such promises in general. In point of fact, Brother Jarrum was an Elder from a place that he was pleased to term "New Jerusalem:" in other words, from Salt Lake City.

It has been the fate of certain spots in England, more so than in most other parts of the European world, to be favoured by periodical visits from these gentry. Deerham was now suffering under the infliction, and Brother Jarrum was doing all that lay in his power to convert half its female population into Mormon proselytes. His peculiar doctrine it is of no consequence to transcribe; but some of his promises were so rich that it is a pity you should lose the treat of hearing them. They commenced with—husbands to all. Old or young, married or single, each was safe to be made the wife of one of these favoured prophets the instant she set foot in the new city. This of course was a very grand thing for the women—as you may know if you have any experience with them—especially for those who were getting on the shady side of forty, and who had not changed their name. They, the women, gathered together and pressed into Peckaby's shop, and stared at Brother Jarrum with eager eyes, and listened with strained ears, only looking away to cast admiring glances one to another.

"Stars and snakes!" said Brother Jarrum, whose style of oratory was more peculiar than elegant, "what flounders me is, that the whole lot of you Britishers don't migrate of yourselves to the desired city—the promised land—the Zion of the mountains. You stop here to pinch and toil and care, and quarrel one of another, and starve your children through having nothing to give 'em when you might go out there to ease, to love, to peace and plenty. It's a charming city; why else should it be called the City of the Saints? The houses have shady verandahs round them with sweet shrubs creeping up, and white posts and pillows to lean against. The bigger a household, the more rooms it has got. Not a lady there, if there was a hundred of 'em in family, but has her own parlour and bedroom to herself, which no stranger thinks of going into without knocking for leave. All round and about these houses are productive gardens, trees and flowers for ornament, and fruits and green stuffs to eat. There's trees they call cotton wood, and firs, and locusts, and balsams, and poplars, and pines, and acacias, some of 'em in full blossom. A family may live for nothing upon the produce of their own ground. Vegetables is to be had for the cutting; their own cows gives the milk—such milk and butter as this poor place, Deerham, never saw—but a rich flavour's imparted

to 'em from the fine quality of the grass; and fruit you might feed upon till you had a surfeit. Grapes and peaches is all hanging in clusters to the hand, only waiting to be plucked! Stars! My mouth waters now at the thought of 'em. I——"

"Please, sir, what did you say the name of the place was, again?" interrupted a female voice.

"New Jerusalem," replied Brother Jarrum. "It's in the territory of Utah. On the maps and on the roads, and for them that have not awoke to the new light, it's called the Great Salt Lake City; but for us favoured saints, it's New Jerusalem. It's Zion—it's Paradise—it's anything beautiful you may like to call it. There's a ball-room in it."

This abrupt announcement rather took some of the audience aback. "A ball-room!"

"A ball-room," gravely repeated Brother Jarrum. "A public ball-room, not far from a hundred feet long; and we have a theatre for acting plays; and we ride in winter in sleighs. Ah! did you think it was with us, out there, as it is with you in the old country? —one's days to be made up of labour, labour, labour; no interlude but starvation, and the crying of children that can't get nursed or fed! We like amusement; and we have it; dancing in particular. Our great prophet himself dances; and all the apostles and bishops dance. They dance themselves down."

The assemblage sat with open eyes. New wonders were revealed to them every moment. Some of the younger legs grew restless at the mental vision conjured up.

"It's part of our faith to dance," continued Brother Jarrum. "Why shouldn't we? Didn't David dance? Didn't Jephthah dance? Didn't the prodigal son dance? You'll all dance on to the last, if you come to us. Such a thing as old legs are hardly known among us. As the favoured climate makes the women's faces beautiful, so it keeps the limbs from growing old. The ball-room is hung with green branches and flags: you might think it was a scene of trees lit with lamps; and you'd never tire of listening to the music, or of looking at the supper-table. If you could only see in a picture the suppers given, it would spoil your sleep, and you'd not rest till you had started to partake of 'em. Ducks, and turkeys, and oysters, and fowls, and fish, and meats, and custards, and pies, and jellies, and coffee, and tea, and cake, and drinks, and so many more things that you'd be tired only of hearing the names. There's abundance for all."

Some commotion amid Brother Jarrum's hearers, and a sound as of a smacking of lips. That supper account was a great temptation. Had Brother Jarrum then started straight off for the Salt Lake, the probability is that three parts of the room would have followed him.

"What's the drinks?" inquired Jim Clark, the supper items imparting to him a curious feeling of emptiness.

"There's no lack of drinks in the City of the Saints," returned Brother Jarrum. "Whiskey's plentiful. Have you heard of mint julep? That *is* delicious. Mint is one of the few productions not common out there, and we are learning to make the julep with sage instead. You should see the plains of sage! It grows wild."

"And there's ducks, you say?" observed Susan Peckaby. "It's convenient to have plenty of sage where there's ducks," added she to the assembly in general. "What a land it must be!"

"A land that's not to be equalled! A land flowing with milk and honey!" rapturously echoed Brother Jarrum. "Ducks in plenty, and sage growing as thick as nettles do here; you can't go into the open country but you put your foot upon it. Nature's generally true to herself. What should she give all those bushes of wild sage for, unless she gave ducks to match them?"

A problem that appeared indisputable to the minds of Brother Jarrum's listeners. They sincerely wished themselves in New Jerusalem.

"Through the streets runs a stream of sparkling water, clear as crystal," continued Brother Jarrum. "You have only to stoop with a can on a hot summer's day, and take a drink of it. It runs on both sides the streets for convenience; folks step out of their houses, and draw it up without trouble. You haven't to toil half-a-mile to get your fresh water there! You'd never forget the silver lake at the base of Antelope Island, once you set eyes on it."

Several haggard eyes were lifted at this. "Do silver grow there, like the sage?"

"I spoke metaphorical," exclaimed Brother Jarrum. "Would I deceive you? No. It's the Great Salt Lake, that shines out like burnished silver, and bursts on the sight of the new pilgrims when they arrive in bands at the holy city—the emigrants from this land."

"Some do arrive then, sir?" timidly questioned Dinah Roy.

"Some!" indignantly responded Brother Jarrum. "They are arriving continually. The very evening before I left, a numerous company arrived. It was just upon sunset. The clouds were all rose-colour tipped with purple and gold, and there lay the holy city at their feet, in the lovely valley I told you of last night, with the lake of glittering silver in the distance. It is a sight for 'em, I can tell you! The regular-built houses, enclosed in their gardens and buildings, like farm homesteads, and the inhabitants turning out with fiddles, to meet and welcome the travellers. Some of

the pilgrims fainted with joy; some shouted; lots danced; and sobs and tears of delight burst from all. If the journey had been a little fatiguing—what of that, with that glorious scene at the end of it?"

"And you see this?" cried a man, Davies, in a somewhat doubtful tone.

"I saw it with my two eyes," answered Brother Jarrum. "I often see it. We had had news in the city that a train of new-comers was approaching, mostly English, and we went out to meet 'em. Not one of us saints, hardly, but was expecting some friend by it: a sister, or a father, or a sweetheart, may-be: and away we hurried outside the city. Presently the train came in sight."

"They have railroads there, then?" spoke a man who was listening with eager interest. It was decent, civil Grind.

"Not yet: we shall have 'em shortly," said Brother Jarrum. "The train consisted of carts, carriages, vehicles of all sorts; and some rode mules, and some were walking on their legs. They were all habited nicely, and singing hymns. A short way before they arrive at the holy city, it's the custom for the emigrants to make a halt, and wash and dress themselves, so as to enter proper. Such a meeting! the kissing and the greeting drowning the noise of the music, and the old men and the little children dancing. The prophet himself came out, and shook hands with 'em all, his brass-band blowing in front of him, and he standing up in his carriage. Where else would you travel to, I'd like to know, and find such a welcome at the end of your journey? Houses, and friends, and plenty, all got ready aforehand; and gentlemen waiting to marry the ladies that may wish to enter the holy state!"

"There *is* a plenty?" questioned again that unbeliever, Davies.

"There's such plenty that the new arrivals are advised to eat only half their fill for a week or two" returned Brother Jarrum. "Of fruits in particular. Some, that have gone right in at the good things without mercy, have been laid up through it, and had to fast for a fortnight after. No; it's best to be a little sparing at the beginning."

"What did he say just now about all the Mormons being beautiful?" questioned a pretty-looking girl of her neighbours. And Brother Jarrum caught the words, although they were spoken in an undertone.

"And so they are," said he. "The climate's of a nature that softens the faces, keeps folks in health, and stops 'em from growing old. If you see two females in the street, one a saint's wife, the t'other a new arrival, you can always tell which is which. The wife's got a slender waist, like a lady, with a delicate colour in her face, and silky hair: the new-comer's tanned, and fat, and freckled,

and clumsy. If you don't believe me, you can ask them that have been there. There's something in the dress they wear, too, that sets 'em off. No female goes out without a veil hanging down behind. They don't want to hide their pretty faces, not they."

Mary Green, a damsel of twenty, she who had previously spoken, really did possess a pretty face: and a rapturous vision came over her at this juncture, of beholding it shaded and set off by a white lace veil, such as she had often seen worn by Miss Decima Verner.

"Now, I can't explain to you why it is that the women in the city should be fair to the eye, or why the men don't seem to grow old," resumed Brother Jarrum. "It is so, and that's enough. People learned in such things, might tell the cause; but I'm not learned in 'em. Some says it's the effect of the New Jerusalem climate; some thinks it's the fruits of the happy and plentiful life we lead: my opinion is, it's a mixture of both. A man of sixty hardly looks forty, out there. It's a great favour!"

One of the ill-doing Dawsons, who had pushed his way in at the shop-door in time to hear part of the lavished praise on New Jerusalem, interrupted at this juncture.

"I say, master, if this is as you're a-telling us, how is it that folks talk so again the Mormons? I met a man in Heartbury once, who had been out there, and he couldn't say bad enough of 'em."

"Snakes! but that's a natural question of yours, and I'm glad to answer it," replied Brother Jarrum, with an air of candour. "Those evil reports come from our enemies. There's another tribe living in the Great Salt Lake City besides ours; and that's the Gentiles. Gentiles is our name for 'em. It's this set that spreads about uncredible reports, and we'd like to sew their mouths up ——"

Brother Jarrum probably intended to say "unaccredited." He continued, somewhat vehemently:

"—To sew their mouths up with a needle and thread, and keep 'em sewed up for ever. They are jealous of us; that's what it is. Some of their wives, too, have left 'em to espouse our saints, at which they nag greatly. The most outrageous things that enemies' tongues can be laid to, they say. Don't you ever believe 'em; it flounders me to think that anybody can. Whoever wants to see my credentials, they are at their beck and call. Come to-morrow morning—in my room upstairs—Come any other morning, and my certificates are open to be looked at, signed in full, at the Great Salt Lake City, territory of Utah, by our prophet, Mr. Brigham Young, and two of his councillors, testifying that I am Elder Silas Jarrum, and that my mission over here is to preach the light to them that are at present asleep in darkness, and bring 'em to the community of the Latter Day Saints. *I'm* no impostor; and I tell you

that the false reports come from those unbelieving Gentiles. Instead of minding their own affairs, they pass their days nagging at the saints."

"Why don't they turn saints theirselves?" cried a voice, sensibly enough.

"Because Satan stops 'em. You have heard of him, you know. He's busy everywhere, as you've been taught by your parsons. I put my head inside your church-door, last Sunday night, while the sermon was going on, and heard your parson tell you that Satan was the foundation of all the ill that was in you. He was right there: though I'm no friend to parsons in general. Satan is the head and tail of bad things, and he fills up the Gentiles with proud notions, and blinds their eyes against us. No wonder! If every soul in the world turned Latter Day Saint, and came over to us at New Jerusalem, where would Satan's work be? We are striving to get you out of the clutches of Satan, my friends, and you must strive for yourselves also. Where's the use of us elders coming among you to preach and convert, unless you meet us half-way? Where's the good of keeping up that 'Perpetual Emigration Fund Company,' if you don't reap its benefit and make a start? These things are being done for you, not for us. The Latter Day Saints have nothing mean or selfish about 'em. They are the richest people in the world—in generosity and good works."

"Is servants allowed to dress in veils, out there?" demanded Mary Green, during a pause afforded by Brother Jarrum, that the audience might sufficiently revolve the disinterested generosity of the Latter Day Saint community.

"Veils! Veils, and feathers, too, if they are so minded," was Brother Jarrum's answer; and it fell like a soothing sound on Mary Green's vain ear. "It's not many servants, though, that you'd find in New Jerusalem."

"Ain't servants let go out to New Jerusalem?" quickly returned Mary Green. She was a servant herself, just now out of place, given to spending her wages upon finery, and generally coming to grief with her mistresses upon the score.

"Many of 'em goes out," was the satisfactory reply of Brother Jarrum. "But servants here are not servants there. Who'd be a servant if she could be a missis? Wouldn't a handsome young female prefer to be her master's wife than to be his servant?"

Mary Green giggled; the question had been put pointedly to her.

"If a female servant *choose* to remain a servant, of course she can," Brother Jarrum resumed. "And precious long wages she'd get; eighty pound a-year—good."

A movement of intense surprise amidst the audience. Brother Jarrum went on:

"I can't say I have known many that have stopped servants, even at that high rate of pay. My memory won't charge me with one. They have married and settled, and so have secured for themselves paradise."

This might be taken as a delicate hint that the married state, generally, deserved that happy title. Some of the experiences of those present, however, rather tended to accord it a less satisfactory term, and there arose some murmuring. Brother Jarrum explained:

"Women are not married with us for time, but for eternity—as I tried to beat into you last night. Once the wife of a saint, their entrance into paradise is safe and certain. We have not an old maid among us—not a single old maid!"

The sensation that this information caused, I will leave you to imagine; considering that Deerham was famous for old maids, and that several were present.

"No old maids, and no widows," continued Brother Jarrum, wiping his forehead, which was becoming moist with the heat of argument. "We pay respect to our women, and like to make 'em comfortable."

"But if their husbands die off?" suggested a puzzled listener.

"The husband's successor marries his widows," explained Brother Jarrum. "Look at our late head and prophet, Mr. Joe Smith,—him that appeared in a vision to our present prophet, and pointed out the spot for the new temple. He died a martyr, did Mr. Joe Smith,—a prey to wicked murderers. Were his widows left to grieve and die after him? No. Mr. Brigham Young succeeded to his honours, and he married the widows."

This was received somewhat dubiously: the assemblage not feeling quite clear whether to approve or to cavil at it.

"Not so much to be his wives, you know, as to be a kind of ruling matrons in his household," went on Brother Jarrum. "To have their own places apart, their own rooms in the house, and to be as happy as the day's long. They don't——"

"How they must quarrel, a lot of wives together!" interrupted a discontented voice.

Brother Jarrum set himself energetically to disprove this supposition. He succeeded. Belief is easy to willing minds.

"Which is best?" asked he. "To be one of the wives of a rich saint, where all the wives are happy, and honoured, and well dressed; or to toil and starve, and go next door to naked, as a poor man's solitary wife does here? I know which *I* should choose if the two chances were offered me. A woman can't put her foot inside the heavenly kingdom, I tell you, unless she has a husband to take her hand and draw her in. The wives of a saint are safe; paradise is in store for 'em; and that's why the Gentiles' wives—

those folks that's for ever railing at us—leave their husbands to marry the saints."

"Does the saints' wives ever leave 'em to marry them others—the Gentiles?" asked that troublesome Davies.

"Such cases have been heard of," responded Brother Jarrum, shaking his head with solemnity of manner. "They have braved the punishment and done it. But the act has been rare."

"What is the punishment?" inquired somebody's wife.

"When a female belonging to the Latter Day Saints—whether married or single—falls from grace and goes over to them Gentiles, and marries one of 'em, she's condemned to be buffeted by Satan for a thousand years."

A pause of consternation.

"Who condemns her?" a voice, more venturesome than the rest, was heard to ask.

"There's mysteries in our faith which can't be disclosed even to you," was the reply of Brother Jarrum. "Those apostate women are condemned to it; and that's enough. It's not everybody that can see the truth. Ninety-nine may see it, and the hundredth mayn't."

"Very true," was murmured around.

"I think I see the waggons and other vehicles arriving now!" rapturously exclaimed Brother Jarrum, turning his eyes right up into his head, the better to take in the vision. "The travellers, tired with their journey, washed and shaved, and dressed, and the women's hair anointed with flagrant oil, all frantic with joy,—shouting, singing, and dancing to the advancing fiddles! I think I see the great prophet himself, with his brass-band in front and his body-guard around him, meeting the travellers and shaking their hands individually! I think I see the joy of the women, and the nice young girls, when they are led to the hyminial altar in our temple by the saints that have fixed on 'em, to be inducted into the safety of paradise! Happy those that the prophet chooses for himself! While those other poor mistaken backsliders shall be undergoing their thousand years of buffetings, they'll reign triumphant, the saints of the Mil——"

How long Brother Jarrum's harangue might have rung on the ears of his delighted listeners, it is not easy to say. But an interruption occurred to the proceedings. It was caused by the entrance of Peckaby; and the meeting had to be terminated somewhat abruptly. While Susan Peckaby sat at the feet of the saint, a willing disciple of his doctrine, her lord and master, however disheartening it may be to record it, could not, by any means, be induced to open his heart and receive the grace. He remained obdurate. Passively obdurate during the day; but rather demon-

stratively so towards night. Peckaby, a quiet, civil man enough when sober, was just the contrary when *ivre*; and since he had joined the blacksmith's shop, his evening visits to a noted public-house—the Plough and Harrow—had become frequent. On his return home from these visits, his mind had once or twice spoken out pretty freely as to the Latter Day Saint doctrine. Once he had gone the length of clearing the shop of guests, and marshalling the saint himself, rather peremptorily, to the retirement of his own apartment. However contrite he may have shown himself for this the next morning, no one desired to have the scene repeated. Consequently, when Peckaby now entered, defiance in his face and unsteadiness in his legs, the guests filed out of their own accord; and Brother Jarrum, taking the flaring candle from the shelf, disappeared with it up the stairs.

This has been a very fair specimen of Brother Jarrum's representations and eloquence. It was only one meeting out of a great many. As I said before, the precise tenets of his religious faith need not be enlarged upon: it is enough to say that they quite equalled his temporal promises. You will, therefore, scarcely wonder that he made disciples. But the mischief, as yet, had only begun to brew.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A VISIT OF CEREMONY.

WHATEVER may have been Lionel Verner's private sentiments with regard to his choice of a wife; whether he repented his hasty bargain or whether he did not; no shadow of dissatisfaction escaped him. Sibylla took up her abode with her sisters, and Lionel visited her, just as other men visit the young ladies they may be about to marry. The servants at Verner's Pride were informed that a mistress for them was in contemplation, and preparations for the marriage were begun. Not until summer would it take place, when twelve months should have elapsed from the demise of Frederick Massingbird.

In the first bitter hour of disappointment, Lady Verner gave free utterance to harsh things. It was in her love for Lionel that she so grieved. Setting aside the facts that Sibylla had been the wife of another man, that she was, in position, beneath Lionel—facts, however, which Lady Verner could not set aside, for they were ever present with her—her great objection lay in the conviction that Sibylla would prove entirely unsuited to him; that it would turn out an unhappy union. She was also grievously disappointed on

another score—she had always hoped that Lionel would marry Lady Mary Elmsley.

And Lucy? There was no mistake about it. Lucy had grown to love Lionel Verner. *How* she loved him, esteemed him, venerated him, none, save her own heart, could tell. Her days had been as one long dream of Eden. The very aspect of the world had changed: the blue sky, the soft breathing wind, the scent of the budding flowers, had spoken a language to her, never before learned: "Rejoice in us, for we are lovely!" It was the strange bliss in her own heart that threw its rose hues over the face of nature; the sweet, mysterious rapture arising from love's first dream: which can never be described by human pen: and never, while it lasts, can be spoken of by living tongue. *While it lasts.* It never does last. It is the one sole ecstatic phase of life, the solitary romance stealing in once, and but once, amidst the world's stern realities; the "fire filched for us from heaven." Has it to arise yet for you—you, who read this? Do not trust it when it comes, for it will be fleeting as a summer cloud. Enjoy it, revel in it while you hold it; it will lift you out of earth's clay and earth's evil with its angel wings; but trust not to its remaining: even while you are saying, "I will make it mine for ever," it is gone. It had gone for Lucy Tempest. And, oh! better for her, perhaps, that it should go: better, perhaps, for all: for if that sweet glimpse of Paradise could take up its abode permanently in the heart, we should never look, or wish, or pray for that better Paradise which has to come hereafter.

But who can see this in the sharp flood-tide of despair? Not Lucy. In losing Lionel she had lost all: and nothing remained for her but to battle with her trouble alone. Passionately and truly as Lionel had loved Sibylla; so, in her turn, did Lucy love him.

It is not the fashion now for young ladies to die of broken hearts—as it was in the old days. A little while given to "the grief that kills," and then Lucy strove to arouse herself to better things. She would go upon her way, burying all feelings within her; she would meet him and others with a calm exterior and a placid smile; none should see that she suffered: no, though her heart were breaking.

"I will forget him," she murmured to herself ten times in the day. "What a mercy that I did not let him see I loved him! I never should have loved him, but that I thought he—— Psha! why do I recall it? I was mistaken; I was stupid—and all that's left to me is to make the best of it."

So she drove her thoughts away, as Lionel did. She set out on her course bravely, with the determination to forget him. She schooled her heart, and schooled her face, and believed she was doing great things. On Lionel she cast no blame—and that was

unfortunate for the determination to forget. She blamed herself; not Lionel. Remarkably simple and humble-minded, Lucy Tempest was accustomed to think of every one before herself. Who was she, that she should have assumed Lionel Verner was growing to love her? Sometimes she would glance at another phase of the picture: That Lionel *had* been growing to love her; but that Sibylla Massingbird had, in some weak moment, by some sleight of hand, drawn him to herself again, extracted from him a promise from which he could not retract. She did not dwell upon this; she drove it from her, as she drove away, or strove to drive away, the other thoughts: although the theory, regarding the night of Sibylla's return, was the favourite theory of Lady Verner. Altogether, I say, circumstances were not very favourable towards Lucy's plan of forgetting him.

Lady Verner so far overcame her prejudices as to call on Sibylla, at Lionel's request; and she took with her Lucy and Decima.

They arrived at an inopportune moment, for Lionel was there. At least, Lionel thought it inopportune. He would very much have preferred not to be present himself, if the calling party included, as he saw it did include, Lucy Tempest.

Sibylla was at home alone; her sisters were out. She had been leaning back in an invalid chair, listening to Lionel, when a servant threw wide the door, and Lady Verner swept in. For her very life she could not avoid showing hauteur in that moment. Sibylla sprang from her chair, and stood with a changing face.

Lionel's countenance, too, was changing. It was the first time he had met Lucy face to face in the close contact necessitated by a room. He had studiously striven not to meet her, and had contrived to succeed. Did he call himself a coward? But where was the help for it?

A few moments given to greeting, and they settled down. Sibylla had been startled by their entrance, and her heart was beating. Her brilliant colour went and came, her hand was pressed upon her bosom, as if to still it, and she lay rather back in her chair for support. She had not assumed a widow's cap since her arrival, and her pretty hair fell around her in a shower of gold. In spite of Lady Verner's prejudices, she could not help thinking her very beautiful; but she looked suspiciously delicate.

"It is very kind of you to come to see me," said Sibylla, speaking timidly across to Lady Verner.

Lady Verner bowed slightly. "You do not look strong," she observed to Sibylla, speaking in the moment's impulse. "Are you well?"

"I am pretty well. I am not strong. Since I returned home, a little thing seems to flutter me, as your entrance has done now.

Lionel had just told me you would call upon me, he thought. I was so glad to hear it! Somehow I had feared you would not do so."

Candid, at any rate; and Lady Verner did not disapprove the apparent feeling that prompted it; but how her heart revolted at hearing those lips pronouncing "Lionel" familiarly, she alone could tell. Again came the offence.

"Lionel tells me sometimes I am so changed since I went out, that even he would scarcely have known me again. I do not think I am so changed as all that. I had a great deal of vexation and trouble, and I grew thin. But I shall soon be well again now."

There was a pause. Lionel, to create a divertisement, raised a remarkably fine specimen of coral from the table, and carried it to his mother.

"Is it not beautiful?" he remarked. "Sibylla brought it home with her."

Lady Verner allowed that it was beautiful.

"Show it to Lucy," she said, when she had examined it with interest. "Lucy, my dear, do you remember what I was telling you the other evening about black coral?"

Sibylla rose and approached Lucy with Lionel.

"I am so pleased to make your acquaintance," she said warmly. "You only came to Deerham a short time before I left it, and I saw scarcely anything of you. Lionel has seen a great deal of you, I fancy, though he will not speak of you. I told him one day it looked suspicious; that I should be jealous of you, if he did not mind."

It was a foolish speech; foolish of Sibylla to give utterance to it; but she did so in all singleness of heart, meaning nothing. Lucy was bending over the coral, held by Lionel. She felt her own cheeks flush, and she saw by chance, not by direct look, that Lionel's face had turned a deep scarlet. Jealous of her!

More awkward pauses—as in these visits, where the parties do not sort well with each other, is sure to be the case, and then Lady Verner slightly bowed to Lucy, as she might have done on their retiring from table, and rose. Extending the tips of her delicately-gloved fingers to Sibylla, she swept out of the room. Decima shook hands with her more cordially, although she had not spoken half-a-dozen words during the interview, and Sibylla turned and put her hand into Lucy's.

"I hope we shall be intimate friends," she said. "I hope you will be our frequent guest at Verner's Pride."

"Thank you," replied Lucy. And perhaps the flush on her face might have been less vivid, had Lionel not been standing there.

He attended them to the carriage; the blue and silver carriage of

the Verners. Lady Verner took her seat on one side, Decima and Lucy opposite to her. Lionel stood a moment after handing them in.

"If you can tear yourself away from the house for half-an-hour, I wish you would take a drive with us," said Lady Verner, her tone not more pleasant than her words. Try as she would, she could not help her jealous resentment against Sibylla from peeping out.

Lionel smiled, and took his seat by his mother, opposite to Lucy. He was resolved to foster no ill-feeling by his own conduct, but to do all that lay in his power to subdue it in Lady Verner.

The footman ascended to his place, and the carriage went on. All in silence for some minutes. A silence which Lady Verner suddenly broke.

"What have you been doing to your face, Lucy? You look as if you had caught a fever."

Lucy laughed. "Do I, Lady Verner? I hope it is not a third cold coming on, or Jan will grumble that I take them on purpose. As he did the last time."

She caught the eyes of Lionel riveted on her with a strangely perplexed expression. It did not tend to subdue her excitement.

Another moment, and Decima appeared to have caught the infection. She had suddenly become crimson; a strange sight on her delicately pale face. What could have caused it? Surely not the quiet riding up to the carriage of a stately old gentleman who was passing, wearing a white frilled shirt and hessian boots. He looked as if he had come out of a picture-frame, as he sat there, his hat off and his white hair flowing, inquiring courteously, but not cordially, after the health of my Lady Verner.

"Pretty well, Sir Rufus. I have had a great deal of vexation to try me lately."

"As we all have, my dear lady. Vexation has formed a large portion of my life. I have been calling at Verner's Pride, Mr. Verner."

"Have you, Sir Rufus? I am sorry I was not at home."

"These fine spring days tempt me out. Miss Tempest, you are looking remarkably well. Good morning, Lady Verner. Good morning."

A bow to Lady Verner, a sweeping bow to the rest collectively, and Sir Rufus rode away at a trot, putting on his hat as he went. His groom trotted after him, touching his hat as he passed the carriage.

But not a word had he spoken to Decima Verner, not a look had he given her. The omission was unnoticed by the others; not by Decima. The crimson of her cheeks had faded to an ashy paleness, and she silently let fall her veil to hide it.

What secret understanding could there be between herself and Sir Rufus Hautley?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SPECIAL VISION.

NOT until summer, when the days were long and the nights short, did the marriage of Lionel Verner with Sibylla West take place. They were made man and wife; Lionel, in his heart of hearts, doubting if he did not best love Lucy Tempest.

A breakfast at Dr. West's: Miss Deborah and Miss Amilly not in the least knowing (as they said afterwards) how they comported themselves at it; and then Lionel and his bride departed. He was taking her to Paris, which Sibylla had never seen.

Leaving them to enjoy its attractions—and Sibylla, at any rate, would not fail to do so—we must give another word to that zealous missionary, Brother Jarrum.

The seed, scattered broadcast by Brother Jarrum, had had time to fructify. He had left the glowing promises of all that awaited them, did they decide to voyage out to New Jerusalem, to take root in the imagination of his listeners, and absented himself for a time from Deerham. This may have been policy on Brother Jarrum's part; or it may have resulted from necessity. It was hardly likely that so talented and enlightened an apostle, as Brother Jarrum appeared to be, should confine his labours to the limited sphere of Deerham: in all probability, they had to be put in exercise elsewhere. However it may have been, for several weeks towards the end of spring, Brother Jarrum was away from Deerham. Mr. Bitterworth, and one or two more influential people, of whom Lionel was one, had very strongly objected to Brother Jarrum's presence in it at all; and again, this may have been his reason for quitting it. However it was, he did quit it; though not without establishing a secret understanding with the more faithful of his converts. With the exception of these converts, Deerham thought he had left it for good; that it was, as they not at all politely expressed it, "shut of him." In this, Deerham was mistaken.

On the very day of Lionel Verner's marriage, Brother Jarrum reappeared in the place. He took up his abode, as before, in Mrs. Peckaby's spare room. Peckaby, this time, held out against it. However welcome the four shillings a week rent was from Brother Jarrum, Peckaby assumed a lordly indifference, and protested he'd rather starve than have poison such as him in the house. Peckaby, however, possessed a wife, who on occasion wore, metaphorically speaking, his nether garments, and it was her will and pleasure to

countenance the expected guest. Brother Jarrum, therefore, was received and welcomed.

He did not hold forth this time in Peckaby's shop He did not in public urge the delights of New Jerusalem, or the expediency of departure for it. He kept himself quiet and retired, receiving visits in the privacy of his chamber. After dark, especially, friends would drop in; admitted without noise or bustle by Mrs. Peckaby; parties of twos and threes, until there would be quite an assembly collected upstairs. Why should not Brother Jarrum hold his levees as well as his betters?

That something unusual was in the wind, was very evident; some scheme, or project, which it appeared expedient to keep secret. Had Peckaby been a little less fond of the seductions of the Plough and Harrow, his suspicions must have been aroused. Unfortunately, Peckaby yielded unremittingly to that renowned inn's temptations, and spent every evening there, leaving full sway to his wife and Brother Jarrum.

About a month thus passed on, and Lionel Verner and his wife were expected home, when Deerham awoke up one morning to a commotion. A flitting had taken place from it in the night. Brother Jarrum had departed, conveying with him a train of followers.

One of the first to hear of it was Jan Verner; and, curious to say, he heard it from Mrs. Baynton, the lady at Chalk Cottage. Jan, who, let him be called abroad in the night as he would, was always up with the sun, stood one morning in his surgery, between seven and eight o'clock, when he was surprised by the entrance of Mrs. Baynton—a little woman, with a meek, pinched face, and grey hair. Since Dr. West's departure, Jan had attended the sickly daughter, therefore he knew Mrs. Baynton, but he had never seen her out in his life. Her bonnet looked ten years old. Her daughters were named—at least, they were called—Flore and Kitty; Kitty being the sickly one. To see Mrs. Baynton arrive thus, Jan jumped to the conclusion that Kitty must be dying.

"Is she ill again?" he hastily asked, with his usual absence of ceremony, giving the lady no time to speak.

"She's gone," gasped Mrs Baynton.

"Gone—dead?" asked Jan, with wondering eyes.

"She's gone off with the Mormons."

Jan stood upright against the counter, and stared at the lady. He could not understand. "Who is gone off with the Mormons?" was his rejoinder.

"Kitty is. Oh, Mr. Jan, think of her sufferings! A journey, such as that, before her! All the way to that dreadful place! I have heard that even strong women die on the road of the hardships."

Jan had stood with open mouth. "Is she mad?" he questioned.

"She has not been much less ever since—since—— But I don't wish to go into family troubles. Can you give me Dr. West's address? She might come back for him."

Now Jan had received positive commands from that wandering physician not to give his address to chance applicants: the inmates of Chalk Cottage having come in for a special interdiction. Therefore Jan could only decline the request.

"He is moving about from one place to another," said Jan. "To-day in Switzerland, to-morrow in France; the next day in the moon, for what we can tell. You can give me a letter, and I'll try and get it conveyed to him somehow."

Mrs. Baynton shook her head.

"It would be too late. I thought if I could telegraph to him, he might have reached Liverpool in time to stop Kitty. There's a large emigration of Mormons to take place in a day or two, and they are collecting at Liverpool."

"Go and stop her yourself," said Jan, sensibly.

"She wouldn't come back for me," replied Mrs. Baynton, in a depressed tone. "What with her delicate health, and what with her wilfulness, I have always had trouble with her. She has been out several times in an evening to hear that Brother Jarrum, and has become infected with the Mormon doctrine. In spite of what I or Flore could say, she would go to listen to the man, and she grew to believe the foolish things he uttered. And now she has gone! There's only Dr. West could get her back again."

About fifteen had gone off, exclusive of children. Grind, his wife, and their young ones; Davies had gone, Mary Green had gone, Nancy from Verner's Pride had gone, and sundry others not necessary to enumerate. It was said that Dinah Roy had made preparations to go, but her heart failed her at the last. Some accounts ran that she did start, but was summarily brought up by the appearance of her husband, who went after her.

Last, but not least, Mrs. Peckaby had *not* gone. No; for Brother Jarrum had stolen a march upon her. What his motive in doing this might be, was best known to himself. Of all the converts, none had been so eager for emigration, so fondly anticipating the promised delights, as Susan Peckaby; and she had made her own private arrangements to steal off secretly, leaving her unbelieving husband to his solitary fate. As it turned out, however, she was herself left: the happy company stole off, and abandoned her.

Brother Jarrum so contrived it, that the night fixed for the exodus was kept secret from Mrs. Peckaby. She did not know that he had even gone from the house, until she rose in the morning and found him absent. Brother Jarrum's personal luggage was not of an extensive character. It was contained in a blue bag: and this bag

was likewise missing. Not, even then, did a shadow of the cruel treachery played her, darken the spirit of Mrs. Peckaby. Her faith in Brother Jarrum was unlimited: she would as soon have thought of deceiving herself, as that he could deceive her. The rumour that the migration had taken place, the company off, awoke her from her happy security to a state of raving torture. Peckaby dodged out of her way, quite afraid of her.

Jan had heard nothing for many a day that so tickled his fancy. He bent his steps to Peckaby's and went in. Jan, you know, was troubled with neither pride nor ceremony: no one less so in all Deerham. Where inclination took him, there went Jan.

Peckaby, all black, with a bar of iron in his hand, a leather apron on, and a broad grin upon his countenance, was coming out of the door as Jan entered. He touched his hair. "Please, sir, couldn't you give her a dose of something to bring her to?" asked he, pointing with his thumb indoors, as he stamped across the road to the forge.

Mrs. Peckaby had calmed down from the rampant state to one of prostration. She sat in her kitchen behind the shop, nursing her knees, and moaning. Mrs. Duff stood near the sufferer, in company with some more cronies: the Deerham ladies were flocking in with their sympathy.

"You didn't mean going, did you?" asked Jan.

"Not mean going!" sobbed Susan Peckaby, rocking herself to and fro. "I did mean going, sir, and I'm not ashamed to own it. If folks has the luck to be offered a chance of Paradise, I dun know many as would say they wouldn't catch at it."

"Paradise, was it?" said Jan. "What was to be found in it?"

"Everything," moaned Susan Peckaby. "There isn't a thing you could wish for under the sun, but what's to be found in plenty at New Jerusalem. Dinners and teas, and your own cows, and big houses and parlours, and gardens loaded with fruit, and veils when you go out, and evening dances, and new caps! And I have lost it! They have gone and left me!"

"And husbands, besides; one for everybody!" spoke up a girl. "You forgot that, Mrs. Peckaby."

"Husbands besides," acquiesced Susan Peckaby, aroused from her moaning. "Every woman's sure to be chose by a saint as soon as she gets out. There's not such a thing as an old maid there, and there needn't be no widders."

Mrs. Duff turned up her nose, and turned it wrathfully on the girl who had spoken.

"If they call husbands their paradise, keep me away from 'em, say I. You girls be like young bears—all your troubles to come. You just try a husband, Bess Dawson. Whether he's a saint, or

a sinner, let him be of a cranky temper, thwarting you at every trick and turn, and you'll see what sort of a paradise marriage is! Don't you think I'm right, sir?"

Jan's mouth was extended from ear to ear, laughing. "I never tried it," said he. "Were you to have been espoused by Brother Jarrum?" he asked of Susan Peckaby.

"No, sir, I was not," she answered in much anger. "I did not favour Brother Jarrum. I'd prefer to pick and choose when I got there. But I had a great respect for Brother Jarrum, sir, which I'm proud to speak to. And I don't believe that he has served me this shameful trick of his own knowledge," she added, with emphasis. "I believe there has been some unfortunate mistake, and that when he finds I'm not among the company, he'll come back for me. I'd go after them, only that Peckaby's on the watch. I never see such a altered man as Peckaby. It had used to be as I could just turn him round my little finger, but he won't be turned now."

She finished up with a storm of sobs. Jan, in an ecstasy of mirth yet, offered to send her some cordials from the surgery, by way of consolation. But cordials had no charm in that unhappy moment for Mrs. Peckaby's ear.

Jan departed. In quitting the door he encountered a stranger, who inquired if that was Peckaby's shop. Jan fancied the man looked something the cut of Brother Jarrum, and sent him in. His coat and boots were white with dust. Looking round on the assembled women when he reached the kitchen, the stranger asked which was Mrs. Peckaby. Mrs. Peckaby signified that she was.

"I have a message from the saint and elder, Brother Jarrum," he mysteriously whispered in her ear. "It must be give to you in private."

Mrs. Peckaby, in a tremble of delight, led the stranger to a small shed in the yard, which she used for washing purposes, and called "the back-'us." It was the most private place she could think of, in her flutter. The stranger, propping himself against a broken tub, proceeded, with some circumlocution and not remarkable clearness of speech, to deliver the message with which he was charged. It was to the effect that a special vision had revealed to Brother Jarrum the startling fact, that Susan Peckaby was *not* to go out with the crowd at present on the wing. A higher destiny awaited her. She would be sent for in a different manner—in a more important form; sent for specially, on a quadruped. That is to say, on a white donkey.*

"On a white donkey?" echoed the trembling and joyful woman.

"On a white donkey," gravely repeated the brother—for that he

* A fact.

was another brother of the community there could be little doubt. "What the special honour intended for you may be, me and Brother Jarrum don't pretend to guess at. It's above us. May be you are fated to be chose by our great prophet hisself. Any how, it's something at the top of the tree."

"When shall I be sent for, sir?" eagerly asked Mrs. Peckaby.

"That ain't revealed neither. It may be next week—it mayn't be for a year; you must always be on the look-out. One of these days or nights, you'll see a white donkey standing at your door. It'll be the messenger for you from New Jerusalem. You mount him without a minute's loss of time, and come off."

But that Mrs. Peckaby's senses were exalted at that moment far above the level of ordinary mortals, it might have occurred to her to inquire whether the donkey would be endowed with the miraculous power of bearing her over the sea. No such trivial question presented itself. She asked another.

"Why couldn't Brother Jarrum have told me this hisself, sir? I have been a'most mad this morning, ever since I found they had gone."

The brother—this brother—turned up the whites of his eyes. "When unknown things is revealed to us, and mysterious orders given, they never come to us a minute afore the time," he replied. "Not till Brother Jarrum was fixing the night of departure, did the vision come to him. It was commanded him that it should be kept from you till the rest were off, and then he were to send back a messenger to tell you—and many a mile I've come! Brother Jarrum and me has no doubt that it is meant as a trial of your faith."

Nothing could be more satisfactory to the mind of Mrs. Peckaby than this explanation. Had any mysterious vision appeared to herself, showing her that it was false, commanding her to disbelieve it, it could not have shaken her faith. If the white donkey arrived at her door that very night, she would certainly mount him.

"Do you think it'll be very long, sir, that I shall have to wait?" she resumed, listening feverishly for the answer.

"My impression is, that it'll be very short," was the reply. "And it's Brother Jarrum's also. Any way, you be on the look-out—always prepared. Have a best robe at hand, ready to clap on the instant the quadruped appears, and come right away to New Jerusalem."

In the openness of her heart, Mrs. Peckaby offered refreshment to the brother. The best her house afforded: which was not much. Peckaby should be condemned to go without food for a week, rather than that *he* should depart fasting. The brother, however, declined: he appeared to be in a hurry to leave Deerham behind him.

"I'd not disclose this to anybody, if I was you," was his parting salutation. "Leastways, not for a day or two. Let the ruck of 'em embark first at Liverpool. If it gets wind, some of them may be for turning crusty, because they are not favoured with special animals, too."

Had the brother recommended Susan Peckaby to fill the tub with water, and stand head downwards in it for a day or two, she was in the mood to obey him. Accordingly, when questioned by Mrs. Duff, and the other curious ones, what had been the business of the stranger, she made a great mystery about it, and declined to answer.

"It's good news, by the signs of your face," remarked Mrs. Duff.

"Good news!" rapturously repeated Susan Peckaby, "it's heaven! I say, Mother Duff, I want a new gownd: something of the very best. I'll pay for it by degrees. There ain't no time to be lost, neither; so I'll come down at once and choose it."

"What *has* happened?" was Mrs. Duff's wondering rejoinder.

"Never you mind, just yet. I'll tell you about it afore the week's out."

And accordingly, before the week was out, all Deerham was regaled with full particulars of the news. And Susan Peckaby, a purple robe of the stuff called lustre laid up in state, to be donned when the occasion came, passed her time night and day at her door and windows, looking out for the white donkey that was to bear her in triumph to New Jerusalem.

CHAPTER XL.

A SURPRISE FOR MRS. TYNN.

In the comfortable dressing-room at Verner's Pride, appropriated to its new mistress, Mrs. Verner, stood the housekeeper, Tynn, lifting her hands and her eyes. You once saw the chamber of John Massingbird, in this same house, in a tolerable litter: but that was as nothing, compared with the litter in this dressing-room—piles and piles of it, one heap by the side of another. Mrs. Tynn stood screwed against the wall. She had got in, but to get out was another matter: there was not a place in which she could put her foot. Strictly speaking, perhaps, it could not be called litter; and Mrs. Verner and her French maid would have been indignant at hearing it so classed. Robes of rich and rare texture; silks standing on end with magnificence; dinner attire, than which nothing could be more exquisite; ball dresses in all sorts of gossamer fabrics; morning costumes, pure and costly; shawls of Cashmere and other

recherché materials; bonnets that would have sent an English milliner crazy; laces that might rival Lady Verner's embroideries—their price fabulous; handkerchiefs that surely never were made for use; dozens of delicately-tinted gloves, cased in ornamental boxes, and trinkets, the cheques for which must have caused Lionel Verner's sober bankers to stare. Tynn might well raise her hands and eyes in dismay. On chairs, tables, drawers, on the floor, there they lay: a goodly mass of vanity, just unpacked from their cases.

Flitting about amidst them was a damsel of coquettish appearance, with a fair skin, light hair, and a turned-up nose. Her grey gown was flounced to the waist, her small lace cap, its pink strings flying, was lodged on the back of her head. It was Mademoiselle Benoite, Mrs. Verner's French maid, one she had picked up in Paris. Whatever other qualities the damsel might want, she had sufficient confidence. Not many hours yet in the house, and she was assuming more authority in it than her mistress.

Mr. and Mrs. Verner had returned the night before, Mademoiselle Benoite and her packages forming part of their train. A whole *fourgon* could not have been sufficient to convey these packages from the French capital to the frontier. Phœby, the simple country maid whom Sibylla had taken to Paris with her, found her place a sinecure since the engagement of Mademoiselle Benoite. She stood now on the opposite side of the room to Tynn, humbly waiting Mademoiselle Benoite's imperious commands.

"Where on earth will you stow them away?" cried Tynn, in wonder. "You'll want a suite of rooms to do it in."

"Where I stow them away!" retorted Mademoiselle Benoite, in fluent, but broken English. "I stow them where I please. Note you that, Madame Teen. Par exemple! The château is grand enough."

"What has its grandeur to do with it?" was Mary Tynn's answer.

"Now, what for you stand there, with your eyes staring and your hands idle!" demanded Mademoiselle Benoite sharply, turning her attack on Phœby.

"If you'll tell me what to do, I'll do it," replied the girl. "I could help to put the things up, if you'd show me where to begin."

"I like to see you dare to put a finger on one of these things!" returned Mademoiselle Benoite. "You confine your services to sewing, and to waiting upon me; but not you dare interfere with my lady's toilette. Tiens, I am capable, I hope! I'd give up the best service to-morrow where I had not sole power! Go you down to the *office*, and order me a cup of chocolate, and wait you and bring it up to me. That maudite drogue, that coffee, this morning, has made me as thirsty as a panthère."

Phœby, glancing across at Mrs. Tynn, turned somewhat hesi-

tatingly to pick her way out of the room. The housekeeper, though not half understanding, contrived to make out that the morning coffee was not approved of. The French mademoiselle had breakfasted with her, and in, Mrs. Tynn's opinion, the coffee had been perfect, good enough for the table of her betters.

"Is it the coffee that you are abusing?" asked she. "What was the matter with it?"

"Ciel! You ask what the matter with it!" returned Mademoiselle Benoite, in her rapid way. "It was everything the matter with it. It was all bad. It was drogue, I say; médecine. There!"

"Well, I'm sure!" resentfully returned the housekeeper. "Now, I happened to make that coffee myself this morning—Tynn's particular about his coffee—and I put in——"

"I not care if you put in the whole canastre," vehemently interrupted Mademoiselle Benoite. "You English know not to make coffee. All the two years I lived in London with Madame la Duchesse, I never had one cup of coffee that was not enough to choke me. And they used pounds of it in the house, where they might have used ounces. Bah! You can make tea, I not say no; but you cannot make coffee."

"What a sight of money those things must have cost!" cried Mrs. Tynn, pointing to the mass before her.

"What that matter?" returned the lady's-maid. "The purse of a milor Anglais can stand anything."

"What did she buy them for?" went on Tynn. "For what purpose?"

"*Bon!*" ejaculated Mademoiselle. "She buy them to wear. What else you suppose she buy them for? They'll not last her six months."

"Six months!" shrieked Tynn. "She couldn't come to an end of these dresses in six months, if she wore three a day, and never put on a dress a second time!"

"She want to wear more than three a day sometimes. And it not the mode now to put on a robe more than once," returned Mademoiselle Benoite, carelessly.

Tynn could only open her mouth. "If they are to be put on but once, what becomes of 'em afterwards?" questioned she, when she could find breath to speak.

"Oh, they good for jupons—petticoats, you call it. Some may be worn a second time; they can be changed with other trimmings to look like new. And the rest will be good for me. Madame la Duchesse gave me a great deal. '*Tenez, ma fille,*' she would say, '*regardez dans ma garde-robe, et prenez autant que vous voudrez.*' She always spoke to me in French."

In the breakfast-room below, in her charming French morning

costume, sat Sibylla Verner. With French dresses, she seemed to be acquiring French habits. Late as the hour was, breakfast remained on the table. Sibylla might have sent the things away an hour ago: but she kept a little chocolate in her cup, and toyed with it. She had never tasted chocolate for breakfast in all her life, previous to this visit to Paris: now she protested she could take nothing else. Possibly she may have caught the taste for it from Mademoiselle Benoite. Her husband sat opposite to her: his chair drawn from the table. A perfectly satisfied, happy expression sat on his face: he appeared to be fully contented with his lot and with his bride. Just now he was laughing immoderately.

Perched upon the arm of a sofa, having come to an anchor there, his legs swaying about in their favourite fashion, was Jan Verner. Jan had come in to pay them a visit and congratulate them on their return. That is speaking somewhat figuratively, however; for Jan possessed no notion of congratulating any one. As Lady Verner sometimes resentfully said, Jan had no more social politeness in him than a bear. Upon entering, Sibylla asked him to take some breakfast. Breakfast! echoed Jan; did she call that breakfast? He thought it was their luncheon: it was getting on for his dinner-time. Jan was giving Lionel a history of the moonlight flitting, and of Susan Peckaby's expected expedition to New Jerusalem on a white donkey.

"It ought to have been stopped," said Lionel, when his laughter had subsided. "They are going out to misery, and to nothing else, poor deluded creatures!"

"Who was to stop it?" asked Jan. "Once let people get the Mormon fever upon them, and it must run its course. It's like the gold fever: nothing will convince folks they are mistaken as to that, except going out to the diggings. There's Susan Peckaby. She has got it into her head that she's going straight off to Paradise as soon as she is in the Salt Lake City. All the world could not convince her she's mistaken."

"Jan, it is not likely that Susan Peckaby really expects a white donkey to be sent for her!" cried Sibylla.

"She as fully expects the white donkey, as I expect that I shall go from here presently, and drop in on Poynton, on my way home," said Jan, earnestly. "He has had a kick from a horse on the shin, and a nasty place it is," added Jan, in a parenthesis. "Nothing on earth would convince Susan Peckaby that the donkey's a myth, or will be a myth; and she wastes all her time looking out for it. If you were opposite their place now, you'd see her head somewhere: poked out at the door, or peeping from the upstairs window."

"I wish I could get them all back again—those who have gone from here!" warmly spoke Lionel.

"I wish sometimes I had four legs, that I might get over double ground, when patients are wanting me on all sides," returned Jan. "The one wish is just as possible as the other, Lionel. The lot sailed from Liverpool yesterday, in the ship *American Star.* And I'll be bound, what with the sea-sickness and the other discomforts, they are wishing themselves out of it already! I say, Sibylla, what did you think of Paris?"

"Oh, Jan, it's enchanting! And I have brought the most charming things home. You can come upstairs and see them, if you like. Benoite is unpacking them."

"Well, I don't know," mused Jan. "I don't suppose they are what I should care to see. What are the things!"

"Dresses, and bonnets, and mantles, and lace, and coiffures," returned Sibylla. "I can't tell you half the beautiful things. One of my *cache-peignes* is of filigrane silver-work, with drops falling from it, real diamonds."

"What d'ye call a *cache-peigne?*" asked Jan.

"Don't you know? An ornament for the hair, that you put on to hide the comb behind. Combs are coming into fashion. Will you come up and see the things, Jan?"

"Not I! What do I care for lace and bonnets?" ungallantly answered Jan. "I didn't know but Lionel might have brought me some anatomical studies over. They'd be more in my line."

Sibylla shrieked—a pretty little shriek of affectation. "Lionel, why do you let him say such things to me? He means amputated arms and legs."

"I'm sure I didn't," said Jan. "I meant models. They'd not let the other things pass the customs."

"Jan, how came Nancy to go off with the Mormons?" asked Sibylla. "Tynn says she packed up her things in secret, and started."

"How came the rest to go?" was Jan's answer. "She caught the fever as I tell you they caught it."

Jan departed. Lionel put on his hat and strolled out of doors, intending to pay a visit to his mother. As he turned into the high-road, he met the vicar of Deerham, the Reverend James Bourne.

They shook hands. And the conversation turned not unnaturally, on the Mormon flight. While they were talking of it, Roy, the ex-bailiff, was observed crossing the opposite field.

"My brother tells me the report runs that Mrs. Roy contemplated being of the company, but was overtaken by her husband and brought back," remarked Lionel.

"How it may have been, about his bringing her back, or whether she actually started, I don't know," replied Mr. Bourne, who was a man with a large pale face and iron-grey hair. "That she intended to go, I have reason to believe."

He spoke the last words significantly. Lionel looked at him.

"She paid me a mysterious visit at the Vicarage the night before the start," continued the clergyman. "A very mysterious visit indeed, taken in conjunction with her words. I was in my study, reading by candle-light, when some one came tapping at the glass door, and stole in. It was Mrs. Roy. She was in a state of tremor, just as I have heard it said she appeared the night the inquiry was held at Verner's Pride, touching the death of Rachel Frost. She spoke to me in ambiguous terms of a journey she was about to take —that she should probably be away for her whole life—and then she proceeded to speak of that night."

"The night of the inquiry?" echoed Lionel.

"The night of the inquiry—that is, the night of the accident," returned Mr. Bourne. "She said she wished to confide a secret to me, which she had not liked to touch upon before, but which she could not leave the place without confiding to some responsible person, who might use it in case of need. The secret she proceeded to tell me was—that it was Frederick Massingbird who had been quarrelling with Rachel that night by the Willow Pool. She could swear it to me, she said, if necessary."

"But—if that were true—why did she not declare it at the time?" asked Lionel, after a pause.

"It was all she said. And she would not be questioned. 'In case of need, sir, in case any one else should ever be brought up for it, tell them that Dinah Roy asserted to you with her last breath in Deerham, that Mr. Fred Massingbird was the one that was with Rachel.' Those were the words she used to me: I jotted them down after she left. As I tell you, she would not be questioned, and glided out again almost immediately."

"Was she wandering in her mind?"

"I think not. She spoke with an air of earnest truth. When I heard of the flight of the converts the next morning, I could only conclude that Mrs. Roy had intended to be amongst them. But now, understand me, Mr. Verner, although I have told you this, I have not mentioned it to another living soul. Neither do I intend to do so. It can do no good to bring up the sad tale. Whether Frederick Massingbird was or was not with Rachel that night; whether he was in any way guilty, or was perfectly innocent, it boots not to inquire now."

"It does not," warmly replied Lionel. "You have done well. Let us bury Mrs. Roy's story between us: and forget it, as far as we can."

They parted. Lionel took his way to Deerham Court, absorbed in thought. His own strong impression had been, that Mr. Fred Massingbird was the black sheep with regard to Rachel.

CHAPTER XLI.

LIONEL'S PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS.

LADY VERNER, like many more of us, found that misfortunes do not come singly. Coeval almost with that great misfortune, Lionel's marriage—at any rate, coeval with his return to Verner's Pride with his bride—another vexation befell Lady Verner. Had Lady Verner found real misfortunes to contend with, it is hard to say how she would have borne them. Perhaps Lionel's marriage to Sibylla was a real misfortune; but this second vexation assuredly was not: at any rate, to Lady Verner.

Some women—and Lady Verner was one—are fond of scheming and planning. Whether it be laying out a flower-bed, or the laying out a marriage, they must plan and project. Disappointment with regard to her own daughter—for Decima most unqualifyingly disclaimed any match-making on her own score—Lady Verner had turned her hopes in this respect on Lucy Tempest. She deemed that she should not be fulfilling the responsibilities of her guardianship, unless, when Colonel Tempest returned to England, she could present Lucy to him, a wife: or, at least, engaged to be married. Many a time now did she unavailingly wish that Lionel had chosen Lucy, instead of her whom he had chosen. Although—and mark how we estimate things by comparison—when, in the old days, Lady Verner had fancied Lionel was growing to like Lucy, she had told him emphatically that it "would not do." Why would it not do? Because, in the estimation of Lady Verner, Lucy Tempest was less desirable from a social point of view than the Earl of Elmsley's daughter, and upon the latter had been fixed her hopes for Lionel.

All that was past and gone. Lady Verner had seen the fallacy of sublunary hopes and projects. Lady Mary Elmsley was rejected—Lionel had married in direct defiance of every one's advice—and Lucy was open to offers. Open to offers, as Lady Verner supposed; but she was destined to find herself unpleasantly disappointed.

One came forward with an offer to her. And that was no other than the Earl of Elmsley's son, Viscount Garle. A pleasant man of eight-and-twenty years; and he was often at Lady Verner's. He had been intimate there a long while, going in and out as unceremoniously as did Lionel or Jan. Lady Verner and Decima could tell a tale that no one else suspected. How, in the years gone by—some four or five years ago now—he had grown to love Decima with his whole heart: and Decima had rejected him. In

spite of his sincere love; of the advantages of the match; of the indignation of Lady Verner; Decima had steadfastly rejected him. For some time Lord Garle would not take the rejection: but one day, when my lady was out, Decima spoke with him privately for five minutes, and from that hour Lord Garle had known that there was no hope; had been content to begin, there and then, and strive to love her only as a sister. The little episode was never known: Decima and Lady Verner had kept counsel, and Lord Garle had not told tales of himself. Next to Lionel, Lady Verner liked Lord Garle better than any one—ten times better than she liked unvarnished Jan; and he was allowed the run of the house as though he had been its son. The first year of Lucy's arrival—the year of Lionel's illness, Lord Garle had been away from the neighbourhood; but somewhere about the time of Sibylla's return he had returned to it. Seeing a great deal of Lucy, as he necessarily did, being so much at Lady Verner's, he grew to esteem and love her. Not with the same love he had borne for Decima—a love such as that never comes twice in a lifetime—but with a love sufficiently warm, notwithstanding. And he asked her to become his wife.

There was triumph for Lady Verner! Next to Decima—and all hope of that was dead for ever—she would like Lord Garle to marry Lucy. A real triumph, to present her to Colonel Tempest on his return, as the Viscountess Garle! In the delight of her heart she betrayed something of this to Lucy.

"But I am not going to marry him, Lady Verner," objected Lucy. "I—I don't like him."

"Not like him!" repeated Lady Verner. "Why, what can there be about Lord Garle that you young ladies do not like?" she wondered; her thoughts cast back to the former rejection by Decima. "He is good-looking, he is sensible; there's not so attractive a man in the whole county, Lionel Verner excepted."

Lucy's face turned crimson. "Had I known he was going to ask me, I would have requested him not to do so beforehand, as my refusal has displeased you," she simply said. "I am sorry you should be vexed with me, Lady Verner."

"It appears to me that nothing but vexation is to be my portion in life!" uttered Lady Verner. "Thwarted—thwarted always!—on all sides. First from one, then the other—nothing but crosses and vexations! What did you say to Lord Garle?"

"I told Lord Garle that I could not marry him; that I should never like him well enough—for he said, if I did not care for him now, I might do so later. But I told him no; it was impossible. I like him very well as a friend, but that is all."

"*Why* don't you like him?" repeated Lady Verner.

"I don't know," whispered Lucy, standing before Lady Verner

like a culprit, her eyes cast down, and her eyelashes resting on her hot face.

"I cannot allow it to end thus," resumed Lady Verner. "You must reconsider your determination and recall Lord Garle."

The words frightened Lucy. "I never can—I never can, Lady Verner!" she cried. "Please not to press it; it is of no use." And Lady Verner, in her anger, quitted the room.

This little episode had taken place the day that Lionel Verner and his wife returned. On the following morning Lady Verner renewed the contest with Lucy. And they were deep in it—at least my lady was, for Lucy's chief part was only a deprecatory silence, when Lionel arrived at Deerham Court, to pay the visit to his mother.

"I insist upon it, Lucy, that you recall your unqualified denial," Lady Verner was saying. "If you will not accept Lord Garle immediately, at any rate take time for consideration. I will inform Lord Garle that you do it by my wish."

"I cannot," replied Lucy, in a firm, almost a vehement tone. "I—you must not be angry with me, Lady Verner—indeed, I beg your pardon for saying it—but I will not."

"How dare you, Lucy——"

Her ladyship stopped at the sudden opening of the door, turning angrily to see what caused the interruption. Her servant appeared.

"Mr. Verner, my lady."

How handsome he looked as he came forward! Tall, noble, commanding. Never more so; never so much so in Lucy's sight. Poor Lucy's heart was in her mouth, as the saying runs, and her pulses quickened. She had not known of his return.

He bent to kiss his mother. He turned and shook hands with Lucy. He looked gay, animated, happy. A joyous bridegroom, beyond doubt.

"So you have reached home, Lionel?" said Lady Verner.

"At ten last night. How well you are looking, mother mine!"

"I am flushed just now," was the reply of Lady Verner, her accent a somewhat sharp one from the remembrance of the vexation which had given her the flush. "How is Paris looking? Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Paris is looking hot and dusty, and we have enjoyed ourselves much," replied Lionel. He answered in the plural, you observe: my lady had put the question in the singular. "Where is Decima?"

"Decima is sure to be at some work or other for Jan," was the answer, the asperity of Lady Verner's tone not decreasing. "He turns the house nearly upside down with his wants. Now a pan of broth must be made for some wretched old creature, now a jug

of beef-tea; now a bran poultice must be made; now some linen cut up for bandages. Jan's excuse is that he can't get anything done at Dr. West's. If he is doctor to the parish, he need not be purveyor also; but you may just as well speak to a post as speak to Jan. What do you suppose he did the other day? Those improvident Kellys had their one roomful of things taken from them by their landlord. Jan went there—the woman's ill with something or other—and found her lying on the bare boards: nothing to cover her, not a saucepan left to boil a drop of water. Off he comes here at the pace of a steam-engine, got an old blanket and pillow from Catherine, and a tea-kettle from the kitchen. Now, Lionel, would you believe what I am going to tell you? No! No one would. He made the pillow and blanket into a bundle, and walked off with it under his arm; the kettle—never so much as a newspaper wrapped round it—in his other hand! I felt ready to faint with shame when I saw him crossing the road opposite, that spectacle, to get to Clay Lane, the kettle held out a yard before him to keep the black from his clothes. He never could have been meant to be your brother and my son!"

Lucy laughed at the recollection. She had had the pleasure of beholding the spectacle. Lionel laughed now at the description. Their mirth did not please Lady Verner. She was serious in her complaint.

"Lionel, you would not have liked it yourself. Fancy his turning out of Verner's Pride in that guise, and encountering visitors! I don't know how it is, but there's some deficiency in Jan; something wanting. You know he generally chooses to come here by the back-door: this day, because he had the kettle in his hand like a travelling tinker, he must go out by the front. It saved him a few steps, and he went out without a blush. Out of my house, Lionel! No one ever lived, I am certain, who possessed so little innate notion of the decencies of life as Jan. Had he met a carriage full of visitors in the courtyard, he would have swung the kettle back on his arm, and gone up to shake hands with them. I had a nightmare that night, Lionel. I dreamt a tall giant was pursuing me, trying to throw some great machine at me, made of tea-kettles."

"Jan is an odd fellow," assented Lionel.

"The worst is, you can't bring him to see, himself, what is proper or improper," resumed Lady Verner. "He has no sense of the fitness of things. He would go as unblushingly through the village with that black kettle held out before him, as he would if it were her Majesty's crown, on a velvet cushion."

"I am not sure but the crown would embarrass Jan more than the kettle," said Lionel, laughing still.

"Oh, I dare say: it would be just like him. Have you heard of

the disgraceful flitting away of some of the inhabitants here after the Mormons?" added my lady.

"Jan has been telling me of it. What with one thing and another, Deerham will rise into notoriety. Nancy has gone from Verner's Pride."

"Poor deluded woman!" ejaculated Lady Verner. "There's a story told in the village about that Peckaby's wife—Decima can tell it best, though. I wonder where she is?"

Lucy rose. "I will go and find her, Lady Verner."

No sooner had she left the room, than Lady Verner turned to Lionel, her manner changing. She began to speak rapidly, with some emotion.

"You observed that I looked well, Lionel. I told you I was flushed. The flush was caused by vexation, anger. Not a week passes but something or other occurs to annoy me. I shall be worried into my grave."

"What has happened now?" inquired Lionel.

"It is about Lucy Tempest. Here she is, upon my hands, and of course I am responsible for her. She has no mother, and I am responsible to Colonel Tempest and to my own conscience for her welfare. She will soon be twenty years of age—though I am sure no one would believe it, to look at her—and it is time that her settlement in life should, at all events, be thought of. But now, look how things turn out! Lord Garle—than whom a better *parti* could not be wished—has fallen in love with her. He made her an offer yesterday, and she won't have him."

"Indeed!" replied Lionel, constrained to say something, but wishing Lady Verner would entertain him with any other topic.

"We had quite a scene here yesterday. Indeed, it has been renewed this morning, and your coming in interrupted it. I tell her that she must have him: at any rate, must take time to consider the advantages of the offer. She obstinately protests that she will not. I cannot think what can be her motive for rejection: almost any girl in the county would jump at Lord Garle."

"I suppose so," returned Lionel, pulling at a hole in his glove.

"I must get you to speak to her, Lionel. Ask her why she declines. Show her——"

"I speak to her!" interrupted Lionel, startled. "I cannot speak to her about it, mother. It is no business of mine."

"Good Heavens, Lionel! are *you* going to turn disobedient?—And in so trifling a matter as this;—trifling, so far as you are concerned. Were it of vital importance to you, you might run counter to me: it is only what I should expect from you."

This was a stab at his marriage. Lionel replied by disclaiming

any influence over Miss Tempest. "Where your arguments have failed, mine would not be likely to succeed."

"Then you are mistaken, Lionel. I am certain that you possess a very great influence over Lucy. I observed it first when you were ill, when she and Decima were so much with you. She has betrayed it in a hundred little ways: her opinions are formed upon yours; your tastes unconsciously bias hers. It is only natural. She has no brother, and no doubt has learned to regard you as one."

Lionel hoped in his inmost heart that she did regard him only as a brother. Lady Verner continued:

"A word from you may have great effect upon her: and I desire, Lionel, that you will, in your duty to me, undertake that word. Point out to her the advantages of the match: tell her that you speak to her as her father: urge her to accept Lord Garle: or, as I say, not to reject him without consideration, upon the childish plea that she 'does not like him.' She was terribly agitated last night: nearly went into hysterics, Decima tells me, after I left her: all her burthen being that she wished she could go away to India."

"Mother—you know how pleased I should be to obey any wish of yours: but this is really not a proper business for me to interfere in," urged Lionel, his face flushed.

"But, Lionel, I wish you to speak in my place, just as if you were her father; in short, acting for her father. As to what Lucy may consider or not consider in the matter, that is of very little consequence. Lucy is so perfectly unsophisticated, so simple in her ideas, that were I to desire my maid Thérèse to give her a lecture, she would receive it as something quite proper."

"I should be most unwilling to——"

"Hold your tongue, Lionel. You must do it. Here she is."

"I could not find Decima, Lady Verner," said Lucy, entering. "When I had been all over the house for her, Catherine told me Miss Decima had gone out. She has gone to Clay Lane on some errand for Jan."

"Oh, of course for Jan!" resentfully spoke Lady Verner, as she moved to the door, and stood with the handle in her hand.

"Lucy, I have been acquainting Lionel with this affair between you and Lord Garle. I have requested him to speak to you upon the point; to ascertain your precise grounds of objection, and—so far as he can—to do away with them. Try your best, Lionel."

She quitted the room, leaving them standing opposite each other. Standing like two statues. Lionel's heart smote him. She appeared so innocent, so good, in her delicate morning dress, with its grey ribbons and its white lace on the sleeves, open to the small fair arms! Simple as the dress was, it looked, in its exquisite taste,

worth ten of Sibylla's elaborate French costumes. Her cheeks were glowing, her hands were trembling as she stood there in her self-consciousness.

Terribly self-conscious was Lionel. He strove to say something, but in his embarrassment could not get out a single word. The conviction of the grievous fact, that she loved him, went right to his heart in that moment, and seated itself there. Another grievous fact came home to him; that she was more to him than the whole world. However he had thrust the suspicion from his mind, refused to dwell on it, kept it down, it was all too plain to him now. He had made Sibylla his wife: and he stood there, feeling that he loved Lucy above all created things.

He crossed over to her, and laid his hand fondly and gently on her head, as he moved to the door. "May God forgive me, Lucy!" broke from his white and trembling lips. "My own punishment is heavier than yours."

There was no need of further explanation on either side. Each knew that the love of the other was theirs, the punishment keenly bitter, as surely as if a hundred words had told it. Lucy sat down as the door closed behind him, and wondered how she should get through the long dreary life before her.

And Lionel? Lionel went out by Jan's favourite way, at the back, and plunged into a dark lane where neither ear nor eye was upon him. He uncovered his head, he threw back his coat, he lifted his head to catch only a breath of air. The sense of dishonour was stifling him.

CHAPTER XLII.

FARMER BLOW'S WHITE-TAILED PONY

LIONEL VERNER was in that frame of mind which struggles to be carried out of itself. No matter whether by pleasure or pain, so that it be not that particular pain from which it would fain escape, the mind seeks yearningly to forget itself, to be lifted anywhere, or by any means, from its trouble. Conscience was doing heavy work with Lionel. He had destroyed his own happiness: that was nothing; he could battle it out, and no one be the wiser or the worse, himself excepted: but he had blighted Lucy's. *There* was the sting that tortured him. A man of sensitively refined organization, keenly alive to the feelings of others—full of repentant consciousness when wrong was worked through him, he would have given his whole future life and all its benefits, to undo the work of the last

few months. Either that he had never met Lucy, or that he had not married Sibylla. *Which* of those two events he would have preferred to recall, he did not trust himself to think about; whatever may have been his faults, he had, until now, believed himself to be a man of honour. It was too late. Give what he would, strive as he would, repent as he would, the ill could neither be undone nor mitigated; it was one of those unhappy calamities for which there is no redress; they must be borne, as best they can, in patience and in silence.

With these thoughts and feelings full upon him, little wonder was there that Lionel Verner, some two hours after quitting Lucy, should turn into Peckaby's shop. Mrs. Peckaby was seated away from the open door, crying and moaning and swaying herself about, apparently in terrible pain, mental or physical. Lionel remembered the story of the white donkey, and he stepped in to question her: anything for a minute's divertisement; anything to drown the care that was racking him. There was a subject on which he wished to speak to Roy, and that took him down Clay Lane.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Peckaby?"

Mrs. Peckaby rose from her chair, curtsied, and sat down again. But for the state of tribulation she was in, she would have remained standing.

"Oh, sir, I have just had an upset;" she sobbed. "I see the white tail of a pony a-going by, and I thought it might be some-'at else. It did give me a turn!"

"What did you think it might be?"

"I thought it might be the tail of a different sort of animal. I be going a far journey, sir, and I thought it was, may be, the quadruple come to fetch me. I'm a-going to New Jerusalem on a white donkey."

"So I hear," said Lionel, suppressing a smile that had arisen in spite of his heavy heart. "Do you go all the way on the white donkey, Mrs. Peckaby?"

"Sir, that's a matter that's hid from me," answered Mrs. Peckaby. "The gentleman that was sent back to me by Brother Jarrum, hadn't had particulars revealed to him. There's difficulties in the way of an animal which can't swim doing it all, that I don't pretend to explain away. I'm content, when the hour comes, sir, to start, and trust. Peckaby, he's awful sinful, sir. Only last evening, when I was saying the quadruple might have mirac'lous parts given to it, like Balum's had in the Bible, Peckaby he jeered, and said he'd like to see Balum's, or any other quadruple, set off to swim to America—he'd find the bottom afore he found the land. I wonder the kitchen ceiling don't drop down upon his head! For myself, sir, I'm rejoiced

to trust, as I says; and as soon as the white donkey do come, I shall mount him without fear."

"What do you expect to find at New Jerusalem?" asked Lionel.

"I could sooner tell you, sir, what I don't expect: it 'ud take up less time. There's a'most everything good at New Jerusalem that the world contains—Verner's Pride's a poor place to it, sir—saving your presence for saying so. I could have sat and listened to Brother Jarrum in this here shop for ever, sir, if it hadn't been that the longing was upon me to get there. In this part o' the world we women be poor, cast-down, half-famished, miserable slaves; but in New Jerusalem we are the wives of saints, well cared for, and clothed and fed, happy as the day's long, our own parlours to ourselves, and nobody to interrupt us. Yes, Peckaby, I'm a-telling his honour, Mr. Verner, what's a-waiting for me at New Jerusalem! And the sooner I'm on my road to it, the better."

The conclusion was addressed to Peckaby himself. Peckaby had just come in from the forge, grimed and dirty. He touched his hair to Lionel, an amused expression upon his face. In point of fact, this New Jerusalem vision was affording the utmost merriment to Peckaby and a few more husbands. Peckaby had come home to his tea, which meal it was the custom of Deerham to enjoy about three o'clock. He saw no signs of its being in readiness; and, but for the presence of Mr. Verner, might probably have expressed his opinion demonstratively upon the point. Peckaby, of late, appeared to have changed his nature and disposition. From being a timid man, living under wife-thraldom, he had come to exercise thraldom over her. How far Mrs. Peckaby's state of low spirits, into which she was generally sunk, may have explained this, no one knew.

"I have had a turn, Peckaby. I caught sight of a white tail going by, and I thought it might be the quadruple a-coming for me. I was shook, I can tell you. 'Twas more nor a hour ago, and I've been able to do nothing since, but sit here and weep: I couldn't red up after that."

"Warn't it the quadrupid?" asked Peckaby in a mocking tone.

"No, it weren't," she moaned. "It were nothing but that white pony of Farmer Blow's."

"Him, was it," said Peckaby with affected scorn. "He is in the forge now, he is; having his shoes changed and his tail trimmed."

"I'd give a shilling to anybody as 'ud cut his tail off," angrily rejoined Mrs. Peckaby. "A deceiving of me, and turning my inside all of a quake! Oh, I wish it 'ud come! The white donkey as is to bear me to New Jerusalem!"

"Don't you wish her joy of her journey, sir?" cried the man,

respectfully, a twinkle in his eye, while she rocked herself to and fro. "She have got a bran new gownd laid up in an old apron upstairs ready for the start. She, and a lot more to help her, set on and made it in a afternoon, for fear the white donkey should arrive immediate. I asks her, sir, how much the gownd 'll have left in him, by the time she have rode from here to New Jerusalem."

"Peckaby, you are a mocker!" interposed his lady, greatly exasperated. "Remember the forty-two as was eat up by bears when they mocked at Elisher!"

"Mrs. Peckaby," said Lionel, keeping his countenance, "don't you think you would have made more sure of the benefits of the New Jerusalem, had you started with the rest, instead of depending upon the arrival of the white donkey?"

"They started without her, sir," cried the man, laughing from ear to ear. "They give her the slip, while she were abed and asleep."

"It were revealed to Brother Jarrum so to do, sir," she cried eagerly. Don't listen to *him*. Brother Jarrum as much meant me to go, sir, and I as much thought to go, as I mean to go to my bed this night—always supposing the white donkey don't come," she broke off in different tones.

"Why did you not go, then?" demanded Lionel.

"I'll tell you about it, sir. Me and Brother Jarrum was on the best of terms—which it's a real gentleman he was, and never said a word nor gave a look as could offend me. I didn't know the night fixed for the start; and Brother Jarrum didn't know it, in spite of Peckaby's insinuations. On that last night, which it was Tuesday, not a soul came near the place but that pale lady where Dr. West attended. She stopped a minute or two, and then Brother Jarrum goes out, and says he might be away all the evening. Well, he was; but he came in again; I can be on my oath he did; and I give him his candle and wished him a good night. After that, sir, I never heard nothing till I got up in the morning. The first thing I see was his door wide open, and the bed not slept in. And the next thing I heard was, that the start had took place: they a-walking to Heartbury, and taking the train there. You might just have knocked me down with a puff of wind."

"Such a howling and screeching followed on, sir," put in Peckaby. "I were at the forge, and it reached all the way to our ears, over there. Chuff thought as the place had took fire and the missis was a-burning."

"But it didn't last; it didn't last," repeated Mrs. Peckaby. "Thanks be offered up for it, it didn't last, or I should ha' been

in my coffin afore the day were out! A gentleman came to me: a Brother he were, sent express by Brother Jarrum, and had walked afoot all the way from Heartbury. It had been revealed to Brother Jarrum, he said, that they were to start that partic'lar night, and that I was to be left behind special. A higher mission was—what was the word? resigned?—No—reserved—reserved for me, and I was to be conveyed special on a quadruple, which was a white donkey. I be to keep myself in readiness, sir, always a-looking out for the quadruple's coming and stopping afore the door."

Lionel leaned against the counter, and went into a burst of laughter. The woman told it so quaintly, with such perfect good faith in the advent of the white donkey! She did not much like the mirth. As to that infidel Peckaby, he indulged in sundry mocking doubts, which were, to say the least of them, very mortifying to a believer.

"What's your opinion, sir?" she suddenly asked of Lionel.

"Well," said Lionel, "my opinion—as you wish for it—would incline to the suspicion that your friend, Brother Jarrum, deceived you. That he invented the fable of the white donkey to keep you quiet while he and the rest got clear off."

Mrs. Peckaby went into a burst of sobs, which Peckaby appeared to enjoy amazingly. "It couldn't be! it couldn't be! Oh, sir, you be as cruel as the rest! Why should Brother Jarrum take the others, and not take me?"

"That is Brother Jarrum's affair," replied Lionel. "I only say it looks like it."

"I telled Brother Jarrum, the very day afore the start took place, that if he took off *my* wife, I'd foller him on, and beat every bone to smash as he'd got in his body," interposed Peckaby, glancing at Lionel with a knowing smile. "I did, sir. Her was out"—jerking his black thumb at his wife—"and I caught Brother Jarrum in his own room and shut the door on us both, and there I telled him. He knew I meant it, too: and he didn't like the look of a iron bar I happened to have in my hand: I saw that. Other wives' husbands might do as they liked; but I warn't a-going to have mine deluded off by them Latter Day Saints. Were I wrong, sir?"

"I do not think you were," answered Lionel.

"I'd Latter Day 'em! and saint 'em, too, if I had my will!" continued Peckaby, wrathfully. "Deceiving villuns!"

"Well, good day, Mrs. Peckaby," said Lionel, moving to the door. "I would not spend too much time, were I you, looking out for the white donkey."

"It'll come! it'll come!" retorted Mrs. Peckaby in an ecstasy of joy, removing her hands from her ears, where she had placed them during Peckaby's heretical speech. "I am proud, sir, to know as

it'll come, in spite of opinions contrairey and Peckaby's wickedness; and I'm proud to be always a-looking out for it."

"This is never it, is it, drawing up to the door now?" cried Lionel, with gravity.

Something undoubtedly was curvetting and prancing before the door; something with a flowing white tail. Mrs. Peckaby caught one glimpse and bounded from her seat, her bosom panting. The agitation betrayed how implicit was the woman's belief; how entirely it had taken hold of her.

Alas for Mrs. Peckaby! alas for her disappointment! It was nothing but that deceiving animal again, Farmer Blow's white pony. Apparently the pony had been so comfortable in the forge, that he did not care to leave it. He was dodging about and backing, wholly refusing to go forward, and setting at defiance a boy who was striving to lead him onwards. Mrs. Peckaby sat down and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XLIII.

STIFLED WITH DISHONOUR.

"Now, then," began Peckaby, as Lionel departed, "what's the reason my tea ain't ready for me?"

"Be you a man to ask?" demanded she. "Could I red up and put on kettles, and see to ord'nary work, with my inside turning?"

Peckaby paused for a minute. "I've a good mind to wallop you!"

"Try it," she aggravatingly answered. "You have not kep' your hands off me yet, to be let begin now. Anybody but a brute 'ud comfort a poor woman in her distress. You'll be sorry for it when I'm gone off to New Jerusalem."

"Now look here, Suke," said he, attempting to reason with her. "It's quite time as you left off this folly: we've had enough on't. What do you suppose you'd do at the Salt Lake? What sort of a life 'ud you lead?"

"A joyful life!" she responded, turning her glance skyward. "Brother Jarrum thinks as the head saint, the prophet hisself, has a favour to me! Wives is as happy there as the day's long."

Peckaby grinned: the reply amused him much. "You poor ignorant creatur," cried he, "you have got your head up in a madhouse; and that's about it. You know Mary Green?"

"Well?" answered she, looking surprised at this divertisement.

"And you know Nancy from Verner's Pride as is gone off," he continued; "and you know half-a-dozen more nice young girls about

here, which you can just set on and think of. How 'ud you like to see me marry the whole of 'em, and bring 'em home here? Would the house hold the tantrums you'd go into, d'ye think?"

"You hold your senseless tongue, Peckaby! A man 'ud better try and bring home more nor one wife here! The law 'ud be on to him."

"In course it would," returned Peckaby. "And the law knowed what it was about when it made itself law. A place with more nor one wife in it 'ud be compairable to nothing but that blazing place you've heard on as is under our feet, or the Salt Lake City."

"For shame, you wicked man!"

"There ain't no shame in saying that; it's truth," composedly answered Peckaby. "Brother Jarrum said, didn't he, as the wives had a parlour a-piece. Why do they? 'Cause they be obleeged to be kep' apart, for fear o' damaging each other, a-tearing and biting and scratching, and pulling eyes out. A nice figure you'd cut among 'em! You'd be wishing yourself home again afore you'd tried it for a day. Don't you be a fool, Susan Peckaby."

"Don't you!" retorted she. "I wonder you ain't afraid o' some judgment falling on you. Lies is sure to come home to people."

"Just take your thoughts back to the time as we had the shop here, and plenty o' custom in it. One day you saw me just a-kissing of a girl in that there corner—leastways you fancied as you saw me," corrected Peckaby, coughing down his slip. "Well, d'ye recollect the scrimmage? Didn't you go a'most mad, never keeping your tongue quiet for a week, and the place hardly holding of ye? How 'ud you like to have eight or ten more of 'em, my married wives, like you be, brought in here?"

"You *are* a fool, Peckaby. The cases is different.

"Where's the difference?" asked Peckaby. "The men be men, out there; and the women be women. I might pretend as I'd had visions and revelations sent to me, and dress myself up in a black coat and a white neck-an-kecher, and such like peacock's plumes—I might tar and feather myself if I pleased, if it come to that—and give out as I was a prophit and a Latter Day Saint; but where 'ud be the difference, I want to know? I should just be as good and as bad a man as I be now, only a bit more of a hypocrite. Saints and prophits, indeed! You just come to your senses, Susan Peckaby."

"I haven't lost 'em yet," answered she, looking inclined to beat him.

"You have lost 'em: to suppose as a life, out with them reptiles, could be anything but just what I telled you—a hell. It can't be otherways. It's again female human natur. If you went mad with jealousy, just at fancying you see a innocent kiss given upon a

girl's face, how 'ud you do, I ask, when it come to wives? Tales runs as them 'saints' have got any number a-piece, from four or five, up to seventy. If you don't come to your senses, Mrs. Peckaby, you'll get a walloping to bring you to 'em; and that's about it. You be the laughing-stock o' the place as it is."

He swung out at the door, and took his way towards the nearest public-house, intending to solace himself with a pint of ale, in lieu of tea, of which he saw no chance. Mrs. Peckaby burst into a flood of tears, and apostrophized the expected white donkey in moving terms: that he would forthwith appear and bear her off from Peckaby and trouble, to the triumphs and delights of New Jerusalem.

Lionel, meanwhile, went to Roy's dwelling. Roy, he found, was not in it. Mrs. Roy was; and, by the appearance of the tea-table, she was probably expecting Roy to enter. Mrs. Roy sat, doing nothing: her arms hung listlessly down, her head also; sunk apparently in that sad state of mind—whatever may have been its cause—which was now habitual to her. By the start with which she sprang from her chair, as Lionel Verner appeared at the door, it may be inferred that she took him for her husband. Surely no one else could have put her into such tremor.

"Roy's not in, sir," she said, dropping a curtsey, in answer to Lionel's inquiry. "May be, he'll not be long. It's his time for coming home, but there's no dependence on him."

Lionel glanced round. He saw that the woman was alone, and he deemed it a good opportunity to ask her about what had been mentioned to him two or three hours ago by the Vicar of Deerham. Closing the door and advancing towards her, he began.

"I want to say a word to you, Mrs. Roy. What were your grounds for stating to Mr. Bourne that Mr. Frederick Massingbird was with Rachel Frost at the Willow Pool the evening of her death?"

Mrs. Roy gave a low moan of terror, and flung her apron up to her face. Lionel ungallantly drew it down again. Her countenance was livid as death.

"You will have the goodness to answer me, Mrs. Roy."

"It were just a dream, sir," she said, the words issuing brokenly from her trembling lips. "I have been pretty nigh crazed lately. What with them Mormons, and the uncertainty of fixing what to do—whether to believe 'em or not—and Roy's crabbed temper, which grows upon him, and other fears and troubles, I've been a-nigh crazed. It were just a dream as I had, and nothing more; and I be vexed to my heart that I should have made such a fool of myself, as to go and say what I did to Mr. Bourne."

One word, above all others, caught the attention of Lionel in the

answer. It was "fears." He bent towards her, lowering his voice.

"What are these fears that seem to pursue you? You appear to me to have been under the influence of fear ever since that night. Terrified you were then; terrified you remain. What is the cause?"

The woman trembled excessively.

"Roy keeps me in fear, sir. He's for ever threatening me. He'll shake me, or he'll pinch me, or he'll do for me, he says. I'm in fear of him always."

"That is an evasive answer," remarked Lionel. "Why should you fear to confide in me? You have never known me take an advantage to any one's injury. The past is past. That unfortunate night's work appears now to belong wholly to the past. Nevertheless, if you can throw any light upon it, it is your duty to do so. I will keep the secret."

"I didn't know a thing, sir, about the night's work," she sobbed.

"Hush!" said Lionel. "I felt sure at the time that you did know something, had you chosen to speak. I feel more sure of it now."

"No, I don't, sir; not if you pulled me in pieces for it. I had a horrid dream, and I went straight off, like a fool, to Mr. Bourne and told it, and—and—that was all, sir."

She was flinging her apron up again to hide her countenance, when, with a faint cry, she let it fall, sprang from her seat, and stood before Lionel.

"For the love of Heaven, sir, say nothing to *him!*" she uttered, and disappeared within an inner door. The sight of Roy, entering, explained the enigma: she must have seen him from the window. Roy took off his cap by way of salute.

"I hope I see you well, sir, after your journey."

"Quite well. Roy, some papers have been left at Verner's Pride for my inspection, regarding the dispute in Farmer Hartright's lease. I do not understand them. They bear your signature: not Mrs. Verner's. How is that?"

Roy stopped awhile: to collect his thoughts, possibly. "I suppose I signed it for her, sir."

"Then you did what you had no authority to do. You never received power to sign from Mrs. Verner."

"Mrs. Verner must have give me power, sir, if I *have* signed. I don't recollect signing anything. Sometimes, when she was ill, or unwilling to be disturbed, she'd say, 'Roy, do this,' or, 'Roy, do the other.'"

"Mrs. Verner never gave you authority to sign," impressively repeated Lionel. "She is gone, and therefore cannot be referred

to; but you know, as well as I do, that she never did give you such authority. Come to Verner's Pride to-morrow morning at ten, and see these papers."

Roy signified his obedience, and Lionel departed. He bent his steps towards home, taking the field way: all the bitter experiences of the day rising up within his mind. Ah! try as he would, he could not deceive himself: he could not banish or drown the one ever-present thought. The singular information imparted by Mr. Bourne; the serio-comic tribulation of Mrs. Peckaby, waiting for her white donkey; the mysterious behaviour of Dinah Roy, in which there was undoubtedly more than met the ear; all these could not cover for a moment the one burning fact—Lucy's love, and his own dishonour. In vain Lionel flung off his hat, heedless of any second sun-stroke, and pushed his hair from his heated brow. It was of no use; as he had felt when he went out from the presence of Lucy, so he felt now—*stifled* with dishonour.

Sibylla was at a table, writing notes, when he reached home. Several were on it, already written, and in their envelopes. She looked up at him.

"Oh, Lionel, what a time you have been out! I thought you were never coming home."

He bent down and kissed her. Although his conscience had revealed to him that day that he loved another better, *she* should never feel the difference. Nay, the very knowledge that it was so would render him all the more careful to give her marks of love.

"I have been to my mother's, and to one or two more places. What are you so busy over, dear?"

"I am writing invitations," said Sibylla.

"Invitations! Before people have called upon you?"

"They can call all the same. I have been asking Mrs. Tynn how many beds she can, by dint of screwing, make up. I am going to fill them all. I shall ask them for a month. How grave you look, Lionel!"

"In this first, early sojourn together in our own house, Sibylla, I think we shall be happier alone."

"Oh no, we should not. I love visitors. We shall be together all the same, Lionel."

"My little wife," he said, "if you cared for me as I care for you, you would not feel the want of visitors just now."

And there was no sophistry in this speech. He had come to the conviction that Lucy ought to have been his wife, but he did care for Sibylla very much. The prospect of a house full of guests at the present moment appeared most displeasing to him, if only as a matter of taste.

"Put it off for a few weeks, Sibylla."

Sibylla pouted. "It is of no use preaching, Lionel. If you are to be a preaching husband, I shall be sorry I married you. Fred was never that."

Lionel's face turned blood-red. Sibylla put up her hand, and drew it caressingly down.

"You must let me have my own way for this once," she coaxingly said. "What's the use of my bringing all those loves of things from Paris, if we are to live in a dungeon, and nobody's to see them? I must invite them, Lionel."

"Very well," he answered, yielding the point. Yielding it the more readily from the consciousness spoken of above.

"There's my dear Lionel! I knew you would never turn tyrant. And now I want something else."

"What's that?" asked Lionel.

"A cheque."

"A cheque? I gave you one this morning, Sibylla."

"Oh! but the one you gave me is for housekeeping—for Mrs. Tynn, and all that. I want one for myself. I am not going to have my expenses come out of the housekeeping."

Lionel sat down to write one, a good-natured smile on his face. "I'm sure I don't know what you will find to spend it in, after all the finery you bought in Paris," he said jokingly. "How much shall I fill it in for?"

"As much as you will," replied Sibylla, too eagerly. "Couldn't you give it me in blank, and let me fill it in?"

He made no answer. He drew it for a hundred pounds, and gave it her.

"Will that do, my dear?"

She drew his face down again caressingly. But, in spite of the kisses left upon his lips, Lionel had awakened to the conviction, firm and undoubted, that his wife did not love him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SHADOWED-FORTH EMBARRASSMENT.

THE September afternoon sun streamed into the study at Verner's Pride, playing with the bright hair of Lionel Verner. His head was bending listlessly over certain letters and papers on his table, and there was a wearied look upon his face. Was it called up by the fatigue of the day? He had been out with some friends in the morning: it was the first day of partridge shooting, and they had bagged well. Now Lionel was home again, had changed his attire, and was sitting down in his study—the old study that had been Mr.

Verner's. Or, was the wearied look, were the indented lines between the eyes, called forth by inward care?

Those lines were not so conspicuous when you last saw him. Twelve or fourteen months have elapsed since then. A portion of that time only had been spent at Verner's Pride. Mrs. Verner was restless; ever wishing to be on the wing; living only in gaiety. Her extravagance was something frightful, and Lionel did not know how to check it. There were no children; there had been no signs of any; and Mrs. Verner positively made it a sort of reproach, a continual cause for querulousness.

She had filled Verner's Pride with guests after their marriage—as she had coveted to do. From that period until early spring she had kept it filled; one succession of guests, one relay of visitors arriving after the other. Pretty, capricious, fascinating, youthful, Mrs. Verner was excessively popular, and a sojourn at Verner's Pride grew to be eagerly sought. The women liked its attractive master; the men bowed to its attractive mistress; and Verner's Pride was never free. On the contrary, it was generally unpleasantly crowded; and Mrs. Tynn, a staid, old-fashioned housekeeper, accustomed to nothing beyond the regular, quiet household maintained by the late Mr. Verner, was driven to the verge of desperation.

"It would be far pleasanter if we had only half the number of guests," Lionel had said to his wife in the winter. He no longer remonstrated against *any:* he had given that up as hopeless.

He need not have urged further. Sibylla would not listen. When new sojourners arrived, they turned out to be more in number than the old. Beds had to be improvised in all sorts of impossible places; the old servants were put out of their chambers and huddled into corners; nothing but confusion and extravagance reigned. Against some of the latter, Mrs. Tynn ventured to remonstrate with her mistress. Fruits and vegetables out of season; luxuries in the shape of rare dishes, many of which Verner's Pride had never heard of, and did not know how to dress, and all of the most costly nature, were daily sent down from London purveyors. Against this expense Mrs. Tynn spoke. Mrs. Verner laughed good-naturedly, and told her it was not she who would be troubled to pay the bills. Additional servants were obliged to be engaged; and, in short, to use an expression much in vogue at Deerham about that time, Verner's Pride was going the pace.

This continued until early spring. In February, Sibylla fixed her heart upon a visit to London. "Of course," she told Lionel, "he would treat her to a season in town." She had never been to London in her life to remain there. For Sibylla to fix her heart upon a thing was to have it: Lionel was an indulgent husband.

To London they proceeded in February. And there the expense was great. Sibylla was not one to go to work sparingly in any way; neither, in point of fact, was Lionel. Lionel would never have been unduly extravagant; but, on the other hand, he was not accustomed to economize. A furnished house in a good position was taken; servants were imported to it from Verner's Pride; and there Sibylla launched into all the follies of the day. At Easter she "set her heart" upon a visit to Paris, and Lionel acquiesced. They remained there three weeks; Sibylla laying in a second stock of toilettes for Mademoiselle Benoite to rule over; and then they went back to London.

The season was prolonged that year. The House sat until August, and it was not until the latter end of that month that Mr. and Mrs. Verner returned to Verner's Pride. Though scarcely home a week yet, the house was filled again—filled to overflowing: Lionel heard sounds of talking and laughter from the various rooms, as he bent over his table. He was opening his letters, three or four of which lay before him. He had gone out in the morning before the post was in.

That embarrassment would inevitably come, if he went on at his present rate of living, Lionel had the satisfaction of knowing beyond all doubt. That was not the worst point upon his conscience. Of the plans and projects that Lionel had so eagerly formed when he came into the estate, some were set afloat, some were not. Those that were most wanted—were most calculated to do real good—lay in abeyance; others, that might have waited, were in full work. Costly alterations were making in the stables at Verner's Pride, and the working man's institute at Deerham, reading-room, club—whatever it was to be—was progressing swimmingly. But the draining of the land near the poorer dwellings was not begun, and the families, many of them, still herded in consort—father and mother, sons and daughters, sleeping in one room—compelled to it by the wretched accommodation of the tenements. It was on this last score that Lionel was feeling a pricking of conscience. And how to find the money to make these improvements now, he knew not. Between the building in progress and Sibylla, he was drained of his resources.

A circumstance had occurred that day to bring the latter neglect forcibly to his mind. Alice Hook—Hook the labourer's eldest daughter—had, as the Deerham phrase ran, got herself into trouble. A pretty child she had grown up amongst them—she was little more than a child now—good-tempered, gay-hearted. Lionel had heard the ill news the previous week on his return from London. When he was out shooting that morning, he saw the girl at a distance, and made some observation to his gamekeeper, Broom, to the effect that it had vexed him.

"Ay, sir, it's a sad pity," was Broom's answer; "but what else can be expected of poor folks that's brought up to live as they do—like pigs in a sty?"

Broom had intended no reproach to his master; such an impertinence would not have crossed his mind; but the words carried a sting to Lionel. He knew how many, besides Alice Hook, had had their good conduct undermined through the living in this way. Lionel had, as you know, a lively conscience; and his brow reddened with self-reproach as he sat and thought these things over. He could not help comparing the contrast: Verner's Pride, with its spacious bedrooms, one of which was not deemed sufficient for the purposes of retirement, where two people slept together, but a dressing-room must be attached; and those poor Hooks, with their growing-up sons and daughters, and only one room, the kitchen excepted, in their whole dwelling!

"I will put things on a better footing," impulsively exclaimed Lionel. "I care not what the cost may be, or how it may fall upon my comforts, do it I will. I declare I feel as if the girl's blight lay at my own door!"

"Roy has come up, sir, and is asking to see you," interrupted Tynn.

"Roy? Let him come in," replied Lionel. "I want to see him."

Roy came in. The same ill-favoured, hard-looking man as ever. The ostensible business which had brought him up to Verner's Pride proved to be of a very trivial nature, and was soon settled. It is well to say "ostensible," because a conviction arose in Lionel's mind afterwards that it was only an excuse: a pretext made by Roy for the purpose of obtaining an interview. Though why, or wherefore, or what he gained by it, Lionel could not imagine. Roy merely wanted to know if he might be allowed to put a fresh paper on the walls of one of his two upper rooms. He would get the paper at his own cost, and hang it at his own leisure, if Mr. Verner had no objection.

"Of course I can have no objection," replied Lionel. "You need not have lost an afternoon's work, Roy, to come here to inquire that. You might have asked me when I saw you by the brickfield this morning. In fact, there was no necessity to mention it at all."

"So I might, sir. But it didn't come into my mind at the moment to do so. It's poor Luke's room, and the missis goes on continual about the state it's in, if he should come home. The paper's all hanging in patches, sir, as big as my two hands. It have got damp through not being used."

"If it is in that state, and you like to find the time to hang the paper, you may purchase it at my cost," said Lionel, who was of too just a nature to be a hard landlord.

"Thank ye, sir," replied Roy, ducking his head. "It's well for us, as I often says, that you be our master at last, instead of the Mr. Massingbirds."

"There was a time when you did not think so, Roy, if my memory serves me rightly," was the rebuke of Lionel.

"Ah, sir, there's a old saying, 'Live and learn.' That was in the days when I thought you'd be an over-strict master; we have got to know better now, taught from experience. It was a lucky day for the Verner's Pride estate when that lost codicil was brought to light! The Mr. Massingbirds are dead, it's true, but there's no knowing what might have happened: the law's full of quips and turns. With the codicil found, you can hold your own against the world."

"Who told you anything about the codicil being found?" demanded Lionel.

"Why, sir, it was the talk of the place just about the time we heard of Mr. Fred Massingbird's death. Folks said, whether he had died, or whether he had not, you'd have come in all the same. T'other day, too, I was talking of it to Lawyer Matiss, and he said what a good thing it was, that that there codicil was found."

Lionel knew that a report of the codicil's having turned up had arisen in Deerham. It had never been contradicted. Matiss, himself, Tynn, and Mrs. Tynn, were the only persons who could have testified that the supposed codicil was nothing but a glove. From the finding of that, the story had originally got wind.

"I don't know why Matiss should have spoken to you on the subject of the codicil at all," Lionel remarked to Roy.

"It's not much that Matiss talks, sir," was the man's answer. "All he said was as he had the codicil in safe keeping under lock and key. Just put to Matiss the simplest question, and he'll turn round and ask what business it is of yours."

"Quite right of him, too," said Lionel. "Have you any news of your son yet, Roy?"

Roy shook his head. "No, sir. I'm beginning to wonder now whether there ever will be news of him."

After the man had departed, Lionel looked at his watch. There was just time for a ride to Deerham Court before dinner. He ordered his horse, and mounted it.

He rode quickly, musing upon what Matiss had said about the codicil—as stated by Roy. Could the deed have been found?—and Matiss forgotten to acquaint him with it. Turning his horse down the Belvidere Road, he told his groom to wait at the corner, and stopped before the lawyer's door. The latter came out, and Lionel mentioned what Roy had said.

"What a meddler the fellow is!" exclaimed the lawyer. "To

tell you the truth, sir, it rather pleases me to mislead Roy, and put him on the wrong scent. He comes here, pumping and trying to get what he can out of me: asking this, asking that, fishing out anything there is to fish. I recollect, he did say something about the codicil, and I replied, 'Ay, it was a good thing it was found, and safe under lock and key.' He takes the wrong handle when he tries to pump me."

Arrived at Deerham Court, Lionel left his horse with his groom, and entered. The first person to greet his sight in the hall was Lucy Tempest. She was in white silk: a low dress, somewhat richly trimmed with lace, and pearls in her hair. It was the first time that Lionel had seen her since his return from London. He had been at his mother's once or twice, but Lucy did not appear. They met face to face. Lucy turned crimson, in spite of herself.

"Are you quite well?" asked Lionel, shaking hands, his own pulses beating. "You are going out this evening, I see?"

He made the remark as a question, noticing her dress; and Lucy, gathering her senses about her, and relapsing into her calm composure, looked somewhat surprised.

"We are going to dine at Verner's Pride; I and Decima. Did you not expect us?"

"I—did not know it," he was obliged to answer. "Mrs. Verner mentioned that some friends would dine with us this evening, but I was not aware that you and Decima were part of them. I am glad to hear it."

Lucy continued her way, wondering what sort of a household it could be where the husband remained in ignorance of his wife's expected guests. Lionel passed on to the drawing-room.

Lady Verner sat in it. Her white gloves on her delicate hands as usual, her essence bottle and laced handkerchief beside her. Lionel offered her his customary fond greeting, and placed a cheque in her hands, which she had asked for.

"Will that do, mother mine?"

"Admirably, Lionel. I am so much obliged to you. Things get behindhand in the most unaccountable manner, and then Decima comes to me with a long face, and says here's this debt and that debt to be met. It is quite a marvel to me how the money goes."

"I met Lucy in the hall, dressed. She and Decima are coming to dine at Verner's Pride, she tells me."

"Did you not know it?"

"No. I have been out shooting to-day. If Sibylla mentioned it to me, I had forgotten it."

Sibylla had not mentioned it. But Lionel would rather take any blame to himself than suffer a shade of it to rest upon her.

"Mrs. Verner called yesterday, and invited us. I declined for

myself. I should have declined for Decima, but I did not think it right to deprive Lucy of the pleasure, and she could not go alone. Ungrateful child!" apostrophized Lady Verner. "When I told her this morning I had accepted an invitation for her to Verner's Pride, she turned scarlet, and said she would rather remain at home. I never saw so unsociable a girl; she does not care to go out, as it seems to me. I insisted upon it for this evening."

"Mother, why don't *you* come?"

Lady Verner half turned from him.

"Lionel, you must not forget our compact. If I visit your wife now and then, just to keep gossiping tongues quiet, from saying that Lady Verner and her son are estranged, I cannot do it often."

Little more was said. Lionel found the time drawing on, and left. Lady Verner's carriage was already at the door, waiting to convey Decima and Lucy Tempest to Verner's Pride. As he was about to mount his horse, Peckaby passed by, rolling a wheel before him. He touched his cap.

"Well," said Lionel, "has the white donkey arrived yet?"

A contraction of anger, not however unmixed with mirth, crossed the man's face.

"I wish it would come, sir, and bear her off on it!" was his hearty response. "She's more a fool nor ever over it, a-whining and a-pining all day long, 'cause she ain't at New Jerusalem. She wants to be in Bedlam, sir; that's what she do! It would do her more good than t'other."

Lionel laughed, and Peckaby struck his wheel with such impetus that it went off at a tangent, and he had to follow it on the run.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE YEW-TREE ON THE LAWN.

THE rooms were lighted at Verner's Pride: the blaze from the chandeliers fell on gay faces and graceful forms. Dinner was over, its scene "a banquet-hall deserted;" and the guests were filling the drawing-rooms.

The centre of an admiring group, its chief attraction, sat Sibylla, her dress some shining material that glimmered in the light, and her hair confined by a band of diamonds. Inexpressibly beautiful by this light she undoubtedly was, but she would have been more charming had she laid herself less out for attraction. Lionel, Lord Garle, Decima, and young Bitterworth—he was generally called young Bitterworth, in contradistinction to his father, who was "old Bitterworth"—formed another group; Sir Rufus Hautley was

talking to the Countess of Elmsley: and Lucy Tempest sat apart near the window.

Sir Rufus had but just moved away from Lucy, and for the moment she was alone. She sat within the embrasure of the window, and was looking on the calm scene outside. How different from the garish scene within! Pure and fair as the moonlight looked Lucy, her white robes falling softly round her, and her girlish face wearing a thoughtful expression. It was a remarkably light night: the terrace, the green slopes beyond it, and the clustering trees far away, all standing out clear and distinct in the moon's rays. Suddenly her eye rested on a particular spot: she possessed a very strong sight, and appeared to detect something dark there; a dark something that had not been there a few moments before.

Lucy strained her eyes, and shaded them, and gazed again. Presently she turned her head, and glanced at Lionel. An expression in her eyes seemed to call him, and he advanced.

"What is it, Lucy? We must have a set of gallant men here to-night, to leave you alone like this!"

The compliment fell unheeded on her ear. Compliments from *him!* Lionel only so spoke to hide his real feelings.

"Look on the lawn, right before us," said Lucy to him in low tones. "Underneath the spreading yew-tree."

"What do you mean, Lucy?" asked Lionel. For he judged by her tone that she had some hidden meaning.

"I believe that some man is standing there. He must be watching this room."

Lionel could not see it. His eyes had not been watching so long as Lucy's, consequently objects were less distinct. "I think you must be mistaken, Lucy," he said. "No one would be at the trouble of standing there to watch the room. It is too far off to see much, whatever may be their curiosity."

Lucy gazed again attentively. "I feel convinced of it now," she presently said. "There is some one, and it looks like a man, standing partly behind the trunk, as if in hiding. His head leans out on this side, certainly, as though he were watching these windows. I have seen the head move twice."

Lionel also took another long gaze. "I thing you are right, Lucy!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I saw something moving then. What business has any one to plant himself there?"

He stepped impulsively out as he spoke—the windows opened to the ground—crossed the terrace, descended the steps, and turned on to the lawn, to the left. A minute, and he was at the tree.

But he gained no satisfaction. The spreading tree, with its imposing trunk stood all solitary on the velvet grass, no living thing being near it.

"We must have been mistaken, after all," thought Lionel.

Nevertheless, he stood under the tree, and cast his keen glances around. Nothing could he see; nothing but what ought to be there. The wide lawn, the sweet flowers closed to the night, the remoter parts, where the trees were denser, all stood cold and still in the white moonlight. But of human disturber there was none.

Lionel went back again, plucking a white geranium blossom and a sprig of sweet verbena on his way. Lucy was sitting alone, as he had left her.

"It was a false alarm," he whispered. "Nothing's there, except the tree."

"It was not a false alarm," she answered. "I saw him move away as you went on to the lawn. He drew back towards the thicket."

"Are you sure?" questioned Lionel, his tone betraying that he doubted whether she was not mistaken.

"Oh yes, I am quite sure," said Lucy. "Do you know what my old nurse used to tell me when I was a child?" she asked, lifting her face to his. "She said I had the Indian sight, because I could see so far and so distinctly. Some of the Indians have the gift greatly, you know. I am quite certain that I saw the object—and it looked like the figure of a man—go swiftly away from the tree across the grass. I could not see him to the end of the lawn, but he must have gone into the plantation. I dare say he saw you coming towards him."

Lionel smiled. "I wish I had caught the spy. He should have answered to me for being there. Do you like verbena, Lucy?"

He laid the verbena and geranium on her lap, and she took them up mechanically.

"I do not like spies," she said in a dreamy tone. "In India they have been known to watch the inmates of a house in the evening, and to bowstring one of those they were watching before morning. You are laughing! Indeed, my nurse used to tell me tales of it."

"We have no spies in England—in that sense of the word, Lucy. When I used the word spy, it was with no meaning attached to it. It is not impossible but it may be a sweetheart of one of the maid-servants, come up from Deerham for a rendezvous. Be under no apprehension."

At that moment, the voice of his wife came ringing through the room. "Mr. Verner!"

He turned to the call. Waiting to say another word to Lucy, as a thought struck him. "You would prefer not to remain at the window, perhaps. Let me take you to a more sheltered seat."

"Oh no, thank you," she answered impulsively. "I like being

at the window. It is not of myself that I am thinking." And Lionel moved away.

"Is it not true that the fountains at Versailles played expressly for me?" eagerly asked Sibylla, as he approached her. "Sir Rufus won't believe they did so. The first time we were in Paris, you know."

Sir Rufus Hautley was by her side then. He looked at Lionel. "They never play for private individuals, Mr. Verner. At least, if they do, things have changed."

"My wife thought they did," returned Lionel, with a smile. "It came to the same thing."

"They did, Lionel; you know they did," vehemently asserted Sibylla. "De Coigny told me so: and he held authority in the Government."

"I know that De Coigny told you so, and that you believed him," answered Lionel, still smiling. "I did not believe him."

Sibylla turned her head away petulantly from her husband. "You are saying it to annoy me. I will never appeal to you again. Sir Rufus, they did play expressly for me."

"It may be bad taste, but I would rather see the waterworks at St. Cloud than at Versailles," observed a Mr. Gordon, an acquaintance that they had picked up in town, and to whom it had been Sibylla's pleasure to give an invitation. "Cannonby wrote me word last week from Paris——"

"Who?" sharply interrupted Sibylla.

Mr. Gordon looked surprised. Her tone had betrayed something of eager alarm, not to say terror.

"Captain Cannonby, Mrs. Verner. A friend of mine just returned from Australia. Business took him to Paris as soon as he landed."

"Is he from Melbourne? Is his Christian name Lawrence?" she reiterated breathlessly.

"Yes—to both questions," replied Mr. Gordon.

Sibylla shrieked, and lifted her handkerchief to her face. They gathered round her in consternation; one offering smelling-salts, one running for water. Lionel gently drew the handkerchief from her face. It was white as death.

"What ails you, my dear?" he whispered.

She seemed to recover her equanimity as suddenly as she had lost it, and the colour began to reappear in her cheeks.

"His name—Cannonby's—puts me in mind of those unhappy days," she said, not in the low tone used by her husband, but aloud—speaking, in fact, to all around her. "I did not know Captain Cannonby had returned. When did he come, Mr. Gordon?"

"About eight or nine days ago."

"Has he made his fortune?"

Mr. Gordon laughed. "I fancy not. Cannonby was always of a roving nature. I expect he grew tired of the Australian world before fortune had time to find him out."

Sibylla was soon deep in her flirtations again. It is not wrong to call them so. But they were innocent flirtations—the result of vanity. Lionel moved away.

Another commotion. Some great long-legged fellow, without ceremony or warning, came striding in at the window close to Lucy Tempest. Lucy's thoughts had been buried—it is hard to say where, and her eyes were strained at the large yew-tree upon the grass. The sudden entrance startled her, albeit she was not of a nervous temperament. With Indian bowstrings in the mind, and fancied moonlight spies before the vision, a scream was inevitable.

It was Jan. Jan, of course! What other guest would be likely to enter in that unceremonious fashion? Strictly speaking, Jan was not a guest—at any rate, not an invited one.

"I had a minute to spare this evening, so thought I'd come up and have a look at you," proclaimed unfashionable Jan to the room, but principally addressing Lionel and Sibylla.

And so Jan had come, and stood there without the least shame in drab trousers and a loose, airy coat, shaking hands with Sir Rufus, shaking hands with any one who would shake hands with him. Sibylla looked daggers at Jan, and Lionel looked cross. Not from the same cause. Sibylla's displeasure was directed to Jan's style of evening costume; Lionel felt vexed with him for alarming Lucy. But Lionel never very long retained displeasure, and his sweet smile stole over his lips as he spoke.

"Jan, I shall be endorsing Lady Verner's request—that you come into a house like a Christian—if you are to startle ladies in this way."

"Whom did I startle?" asked Jan.

"You startled Lucy."

"Nonsense! Did I, Miss Lucy?"

"Yes, you did a little, Jan," she replied.

"What a stupid you must be!" retorted gallant Jan.

They were standing together within the large window, Jan and Lionel; Lucy sitting close to them. She sat with her head a little bent, scenting her verbena.

"The truth is, Jan, I and Lucy have been watching some intruder who had taken up his station on the lawn underneath the yew-tree," whispered Lionel. "I suppose Lucy thought he was coming in upon us."

"Yes, I did really think he was," said Lucy, looking up.

"Who was it?" asked Jan.

"He did not give us the opportunity of ascertaining," replied

Lionel. "I am not quite sure, mind, that I did see him; but Lucy is positive upon the point. I went to the tree, but he had disappeared. It is rather strange why he should be watching."

"He was watching this room attentively," said Lucy, "and I saw him move away when Mr. Verner went on to the lawn. I am sure he was a spy of some sort."

"I can tell you who it was," said Jan. "It was Roy."

"Roy!" repeated Lionel. "Why do you say this?"

"Well," said Jan, "as I turned in here, I saw Roy cross the road to the opposite gate. I don't know where he could have sprung from, except from these grounds. That he was neither behind me nor before me as I came up the road, I can declare."

"Then it was Roy!" exclaimed Lionel. "He would have had about time to get into the road, from the time we saw him under the tree. That the fellow is prying into my affairs and movements, I was made aware of to-day; but why he should watch my house I cannot imagine. We shall have an account to settle, Mr. Roy!"

Decima came up, asking what private matter they were discussing, and Lionel and Lucy went over the ground again, acquainting her with what had been seen. They stood together in a group, conversing in an undertone. By-and-by, Mrs. Verner passed, moving from one part of the room to another, on the arm of Sir Rufus Hautley.

"Quite a family conclave," she exclaimed, with a laugh. "Decima, however much you may desire attention, it is scarcely fair to monopolize that of Mr. Verner in his own house. If he forgets that he has guests present, you should not help him to do so."

"It would be well if all wished for attention as little as does Miss Verner," exclaimed Lord Garle. His voice rung out to the ends of the room, and a sudden stillness fell upon it: his words may have been taken as a covert reproof to Mrs. Verner. They were not meant as such. There was no living woman of whom Lord Garle thought so highly as he thought of Decima Verner; and he had spoken in the moment's impulse.

Sibylla believed he had purposely flung a shaft at her. And she flung one again—not at him, but at Decima. She was of a terribly jealous nature, and could bear any reproach to herself, better than that another woman should be praised beside her.

"When young ladies find themselves neglected, their charms wasted on the desert air, they naturally do covet attention, although it be only a brother's."

Perhaps the first truly severe glance that Lionel Verner ever gave his wife he gave her then. Disdaining any defence of his sister, he stood, haughty, impassive, his lips drawn in, his eyes fixed sternly

on Sibylla. Decima remained quiet under the insult, except that she flushed scarlet. Lord Garle did not. Lord Garle spoke up again, in the impetuosity of his open, honest nature.

"I can testify that if Miss Verner is neglected, it is her own fault alone. You are mistaken in your premises, Mrs. Verner."

The tone was pointedly significant, the words were unmistakably clear, and the room could only become enlightened to the fact that Miss Verner might have been Lady Garle. Sibylla laughed a little laugh of disbelief, as she went onwards with Sir Rufus Hautley; and Lionel remained enshrined in his terrible mortification. That his wife should so have forgotten herself!

"I must be going," cried Jan, good-naturedly interrupting the unpleasant silence.

"You have not long come," said Lucy.

"I didn't leave word where I was coming, and some one may be going dead while they are scouring the parish for me. Good night to you all; good night, Miss Lucy."

With a nod to the room, away went Jan as unceremoniously as he had entered; and, not very long afterwards, the first carriage drew up. It was Lady Verner's. Lord Garle hastened to Decima, and Lionel took out Lucy Tempest.

"Will you think me very foolish, if I say a word of warning to you?" asked Lucy in a low tone of Lionel, as they reached the terrace.

"A word of warning to me, Lucy!" he repeated. "Of what nature?"

"That Roy is not a good man. He was greatly incensed at your putting him out of his place when you succeeded to Verner's Pride, and it is said that he cherishes vengeance. He may have been watching to-night for an opportunity to injure you. Take care of him."

Lionel smiled as he looked at her. Her upturned face looked pale and anxious in the moonlight. Lionel could not receive the fear at all: he would as soon have thought to dread the most improbable thing imaginable, as to dread this sort of violence, whether from Roy, or from any one else.

"There's no fear whatever, Lucy."

"I know you will not see it for yourself, and that is the reason why I am presumptuous enough to suggest the idea to you. Pray be cautious! pray take care of yourself!"

He shook his head laughingly as he looked down upon her. "Thank you heartily all the same for your consideration, Lucy," said he, and for the very life of him he could not help pressing her hand more warmly than was needful as he placed her in the carriage.

They drove away. Lord Garle returned to the room; Lionel stood

against one of the outer pillars, looking forth on the lovely moonlight scene. The part played by Roy—if it was Roy—in the night's doings disturbed him not; but that his wife had shown herself so entirely unlike a lady did disturb him. In bitter contrast to Lucy did she stand out to his mind that night. He turned away after some minutes with an impatient movement, as if he would fain throw remembrance and vexation from him. Lionel had himself chosen his companion in life, and none knew better than he that he must abide by it: none could be more firmly resolved to do his full duty by her in love. Sibylla was standing outside the window alone. Lionel approached her, and gently laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Sibylla, what caused you to show agitation when Cannonby's name was mentioned?"

"I told you," answered Sibylla. "It is dreadful to be reminded of that miserable time. It was Cannonby, you know, who buried my husband."

And before Lionel could say more, she had shaken his hand from her shoulder, and was back amidst her guests.

Jan had said some one might be going dead while the parish was being scoured for him: and, in point of fact, Jan found on reaching home that that undesirable consummation was not unlikely to occur. As you will find also, if you will make an evening call upon Mrs. Duff.

Mrs. Duff stood behind her counter, sorting silks. Not rich piece-silks that are made into gowns; Mrs. Duff's shop did not aspire to that luxurious class of goods; but humble skeins of mixed sewing-silks, that were kept tied up in a piece of wash-leather. Mrs. Duff's head and a customer's were brought together over the bundle, endeavouring to fix upon a skein of a particular shade, by the help of the one gas-burner which flared away above them.

"Drat the silk!" said Mrs. Duff at length. "One can't tell which is which, by candlelight. The green looks blue, and the blue looks green. Look at these two skeins, Polly: which *is* the green?"

Miss Polly Dawson, a showy damsel with black hair and a cherry-coloured net at the back of it,—one of the family that Roy was pleased to term the ill-doing Dawsons,—took the two skeins in her hand.

"Blest if I can tell!" was her answer. "It's for doing up mother's green silk bonnet, so it won't do to take blue. You're more used to it nor me, Mrs. Duff."

"My eyes never were good for sorting silks by this light," responded Mrs. Duff. "I'll tell you what, Polly: you shall take 'em both. Your mother must take the responsibility of fixing on

one herself; or let her keep them till morning and choose it then. She should have sent by daylight. You can bring back the skein you don't use to-morrow; but mind you keep it clean."

"Wrap 'em up," curtly returned Miss Polly Dawson.

Mrs. Duff was proceeding to do so, when some tall thin form, bearing a large bundle, entered the shop in a fluster. It was Mrs. Peckaby. She sat herself down on the only stool the shop contained, and let the bundle slip to the floor.

"Give a body leave to rest a bit, Mother Duff! I be turned a'most inside out."

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. Duff, while Polly Dawson surveyed her with a stare.

"There's a white cow in the pound. I can't tell ye the turn it give me, coming sudden upon it. I thought nothing less, at first glance, but it was the white quadruple."

"What! hasn't that there white donkey come yet?" demanded Polly Dawson; who, in conjunction with sundry others of her age and sex in the village, was not sparing of her remarks to Mrs. Peckaby on the subject, thereby considerably aggravating that lady.

"You hold your tongue, Polly Dawson, and don't be brazen, if you can help it," rebuked Mrs. Peckaby. "I was so took aback for the minute, that I could neither stir nor speak," she resumed to Mrs. Duff. "But when I found it was nothing but a old strayed wretch of a pounded cow, I a'most dropped with the disappointment. So I thought I'd come back here and take a rest. Where's Dan?"

"Dan's out," answered Mrs. Duff.

"Is he? I thought he might have took this parcel down to Sykes's, and saved me the sight o' that pound again and the deceiver in it. It's just my luck!"

"Dan's gone up to Verner's Pride," continued Mrs. Duff. "That fine French madmizel as rules there come down for some trifles this evening, and took him home with her to carry the parcel. It's time he was back, though, and more than time. 'Twasn't bigger, neither, than a penny bun, but 'twas too big for *her*. Isn't it a-getting the season for you to think of a new gownd, Mrs. Peckaby?" resumed Mother Duff, returning to business. "I have some beautiful winter stuffs in."

"I hope the only new gownd as I shall want till I gets to New Jerusalem, is the purple one I've prepared for it," replied Mrs. Peckaby. "I don't think the journey's far off. I had a dream last night as I saw a great crowd o' people dressed in white a-coming out to meet me. I look upon it as a token that I shall soon be there."

"I wouldn't go out to that there New Jerusalem if ten white donkeys come to fetch me!" cried Polly Dawson, tossing her head with scorn. "It *is* a nice place, by all that I have heard! Them saints——"

A most appalling interruption. Moaning, sobbing, his breath coming in gasps, his hair standing on end, his eyes starting, and his face ghastly, there burst in upon them Master Dan Duff. That he was in the very height of terror, there could be no mistaking. To add to the confusion, he flung his arms out as he came in, and his hand caught one of the side panes in the bow window and shattered it, the fragments falling amongst the displayed wares. Dan leaped in, caught his mother with a spasmodic howl, and fell down on some bundles in a corner of the small shop.

Mrs. Duff was dragged down with him. She soon extricated herself, and stared at the boy in very astonishment. However inclined to play tricks, out of doors, Mr. Dan never ventured to play them, in. Polly Dawson stared. Susan Peckaby, forgetting New Jerusalem for once, sprang off her stool and stared. But that his terror was genuine, and Mrs. Duff saw that it was, Dan had certainly been treated to that bugbear of his domestic life—a "basting."

"What has took you now?" sharply demanded Mrs. Duff, partly in curiosity, partly in wrath.

"I see'd a dead man," responded Dan, and he forthwith fell into convulsions.

They shook him, pulled him, pinched him. One laid hold of his head, another of his feet; but they could make nothing of him. The boy's face was white, his hands and arms were twitching, and froth was gathering on his lips. By this time the shop was full.

"Run across, one of you," cried the mother, turning her face to the crowd, "and see if you can find Mr. Jan Verner."

CHAPTER XLVI.

DAN DUFF.

JAN VERNER was turning in at his own door—the surgery—at a swinging pace. Jan's natural pace was deliberate; but Jan found so much to do, now he was alone in the business, that he had no resource but to move at the rate of a steam-engine. Otherwise he would never have got through his day's work. Jan had tried one assistant, who had proved more plague than profit, and Jan was better without him. Master Cheese, promoted now to tail-coats and turn-up collars, was coming on, and could attend to trifling cases.

Master Cheese wished to be promoted also to "Mister" Cheese; but he remained obstinately short, and people would still call him "Master." He appeared to grow in breadth instead of height, and underwent, in consequence, a continual inward mortification. Jan would tell him he should eat less and walk more; but the advice was not taken.

Jan Verner was turning into the surgery at a swinging pace, and came in violent contact with Master Cheese, who was coming out at another sharp pace. Jan rubbed his chest, and Cheese his head.

"I say, Jan," said he, "can't you look where you're going?"

"Can't *you* look?" returned Jan. "Where are you off to?"

"There's something the matter at Duff's. About a dozen came here in a body, wanting you. Bob said Dan Duff was dying.

Jan turned his eyes on Bob, the surgery-boy. Bob answered the look:

"It's what they said, sir. They said Dan Duff was a-dying and a-frothing at the mouth. It's about five minutes ago, sir."

"Did you go over?" asked Jan of Cheese. "I saw a crowd round Mrs. Duff's door."

"No, I didn't. I am going now. I was indoors, having my supper."

"Then you need not trouble yourself," returned Jan. "Stop where you are, and digest your supper."

He, Jan, was speeding off, when a fresh deputation arrived. Twenty anxious faces at the least, all in commotion, their tongues going together. "Dan was frothing dreadful, and his legs were twitchin' like one in the epilepsies."

"What has caused it?" asked Jan. "I saw him well enough an hour or two ago."

"He saw a dead man, sir; as it's said. We can't come to the bottom of it, 'cause of his not answering no questions. He's too bad, he is."

"He did see a dead man," put in Polly Dawson, who made one of the deputation, and was proud of being able to add her testimony to the asserted fact. "Leastways, he said he did. I was buying some silk, sir, at Mother Duff's shop, and Susan Peckaby was in there too, talking rubbish about her white donkey, when Dan flounders in upon us in a state not to be told, frightening us dreadful, and smashing in the winder with his arm. And he said he'd seen a dead man."

Jan could not make sense of the tale. There was no one lying dead in Deerham, that he knew of. He pushed the crowd round the door right and left to obtain entrance. The shop was pretty full already, but numbers pushed in after Jan. Dan had been

carried into the kitchen at the back of the shop, and was laid upon the floor, a pillow under his head. The kitchen was more crowded than the shop: there was not breathing room; and space could hardly be found for Jan.

The shop was Mrs. Duff's department. If she chose to pack it full of people to the ceiling, it was her affair: but Jan made the kitchen, where the boy lay, his, and he ordered every one out of it.

"I was here when he came in; and I knew what it was a'most before he spoke," said Susan Peckaby. "He's been frightened by that thing in the pound. Only a few minutes before, it had turned my inside a'most out. I took it for some'at else, more's the grief! but it looks, for all the world, like a ghost in the moonlight."

"What is in the pound?" demanded Jan.

"It's a white cow," responded Mrs. Peckaby. "And it strikes me as it's Farmer Blow's. He has a white cow, you know, sir, and he has a white pony, and they be always giving me a turn, one or t'other of 'em. I'd like old Blow to be indicted, I would! keeping white animals to upset folks. It's not a week since I met that cow in the road at dusk,—strayed through a gap in the hedge. Tiresome beast! causing my heart to leap into my mouth!"

"If Dan has put himself into this state, and done all this damage, through nothing but seeing a white cow, won't I baste him!" emphatically rejoined Mrs. Duff.

For some time, in spite of all his skill and attention—and he spared neither—Jan could make no impression upon the unhappy Dan. His mother's bed was made ready for him—Dan himself sharing the accommodation of a dark closet in an ordinary way, in common with his brothers—and Jan carried him up to it. There he revived, sufficiently to answer a question or two rationally. It must be confessed that Jan felt some curiosity upon the subject: to suppose the boy had been thrown into that state, simply by seeing a white cow in the pound, was ridiculous.

"What frightened you?" asked Jan.

"I see'd a dead man," answered the boy. "Oh lor!"

"Well?" said Jan, with composure, "he didn't eat you. What is there in a dead man to be alarmed at? I have seen scores—handled 'em, too. What dead man was it?"

The boy pulled the bed-clothes over him, and moaned. Jan pulled them down again.

"Of course you can't tell! There's no dead man in Deerham. Was it in the churchyard?"

"No."

"Was it in the pound?" asked Jan triumphantly, thinking he had it right this time.

"No."

The answer was unexpected.

"Where was it, then?"

The boy only moaned, beginning to shake and twitch again.

"Now, Dan Duff, this won't do," said Jan. "Tell me quietly what you saw, and where you saw it."

"I see'd a dead man," reiterated Dan Duff. And it appeared to be all he was capable of saying.

"You saw a white cow on its hind legs," returned Jan. "That's what you saw. I am surprised at you, Dan Duff. I should have thought you more of a man."

Whether the reproof overcame Master Duff's nerves again, or the remembrance of the "dead man," certain it was, that he relapsed into a state which rendered it imprudent, in Jan's opinion, to continue any further questioning for the present.

But, if Dan's organs of disclosure are for the present in abeyance, there is no reason why we should not find out what we can for ourselves. You may be sure that Deerham would not fail to do it.

The French madmizel—as Mrs. Duff styled her, meaning of course, Mademoiselle Benoite—had called in at Mrs. Duff's shop and made a purchase. It consisted—if you are curious to know—of pins and needles, and a staylace. Not a parcel that would have weighed her down, certainly, had she borne it herself: but it pleased her to demand that Dan should carry it for her. This she did, partly to display her own consequence, chiefly that she might have a companion home, for Mademoiselle Benoite did not relish the lonely walk by moonlight to Verner's Pride. Of course young Dan was at the beck and call of Mrs. Duff's customers; that employment being, as Mademoiselle herself might have said, his *spécialité*. Whether a customer bought a parcel that would have filled a van, or one that might have gone inside a thimble, Master Dan was equally expected to be in readiness to carry the purchase to its destination at night, if called upon. Master Dan's days being connected now with the brickfields, where his "spécialité" appeared to be to put layers of clay upon his clothes.

Accordingly, Dan started with Mademoiselle Benoite. She had been making purchases at other places, which she had brought away with her—shoes, stationery, and various things, all of which were handed over to the porter, Dan. They arrived at Verner's Pride in safety, and Dan was ordered to follow her in, and deposit his packages on the table of the apartment that was called the steward's room.

"One, two, three, four," counted Mademoiselle Benoite, with French caution, lest he should have dropped any by the way. "You go outside now, Dan, and I bring you something from my pocket for your trouble."

Dan returned outside accordingly, and stood gazing at the laundry windows, which were lighted up. Mademoiselle dived into her pocket, took something from thence, which she screwed carefully up in a bit of newspaper, and handed it to Dan. Dan had watched the process with a glow of satisfaction, believing it could be nothing less than a silver sixpence. How much more it might prove, Dan's aspirations were afraid to anticipate.

"There!" said Mademoiselle, when she put it into his hand. "Now you can go back to your mother."

She shut the door in his face somewhat inhospitably, and Dan eagerly opened his *cadeau*. It contained—two lumps of fine white sugar.

"Mean old cat!" burst forth Dan. "If it wasn't that mother 'ud beat me, I'd never bring a parcel for her again, not if she bought up the shop. Wouldn't I like to give all the French a licking!"

Munching his sugar wrathfully, he passed across the yard, and through the gate. There he hesitated which way home he should take, as he had hesitated that bygone evening, when he had come up upon the errand to poor Rachel Frost. More than four years had elapsed since then, and Dan was now fourteen: but he was a young and childish boy of his age, which might be owing to the fact of his being so kept under by his mother.

"I have a good mind to trick her!" soliloquized he; alluding, it must be owned, to that revered mother. "She wouldn't let me go out to Bill Hook's to-night; though I told her it wasn't for nonsense I wanted to see him, but about that there grey ferret. I will, too! I'll go back the field way, and cut down there. She'll be none the wiser."

Now this was really a brave resolve for Dan Duff. The proposed road would take him past the Willow Pool; and he, in common with other timid spirits, had been given to eschew that place at night, since the end of Rachel. It must be supposed that the business, touching the grey ferret, was one of importance for Dan to abandon his usual fears, and turn towards that pool.

Not once, from that time to this, had Dan Duff taken this road alone at night. From that cause probably, no sooner had he now turned into the lane, than he began to think of Rachel. He would have preferred to think of anything else in the world: but he found, as many others are obliged to find, that unpleasant thoughts cannot be driven away at will. It was not so much that that past night of misfortune was present to him, as that he feared to meet Rachel's ghost.

He went on, glancing furtively on all sides, growing hotter and hotter. There, on his right, was the gate through which he had

entered the field to give chase to the supposed cat; there, on the left, was the high hedge: before him lay the length of lane traversed that evening by the tall man, who had remained undiscovered from that hour to this. Dan could see nothing now; no tall man, no cat; even the latter might have proved a welcome intruder. He glanced up at the calm sky, at the bright moon riding overhead. The night was perfectly still; a lovely night, could Dan only have kept ghosts out of his mind.

Suddenly a horse, in the field on the other side of the hedge, set up a loud neigh, right in Dan's ear Coming thus unexpectedly, it startled Dan above everything. He half resolved to go back, and turned round and looked the way he had come. But he thought of the grey ferret, and plucked up courage and went on again: intending, the moment he came in sight of the Willow Pool, to make a dash past it at his utmost speed.

The intention was not carried out. Clambering over the gate which led to the enclosure, a more ready way to Dan than opening it, he was brought within view of the pool. There it was, down in the dreary lower part, near the trees. The pool itself was distinct enough, lying to the right, and Dan involuntarily looked towards it. Not to have saved his life, could Dan have helped looking.

Susan Peckaby had said to Jan, that her heart leaped into her mouth at sight of the white cow in the pound. Poor Dan Duff might have said that his heart leaped right out of him, at sight now of the Willow Pool. For there was some shadowy figure moving round it.

Dan stood powerless. But for the gate behind him he would have turned and run: to scramble back over that, his limbs utterly refused. The delay caused him, in spite of his fear, to discern the very obvious fact, that the figure was not that of a woman habited in white—as the orthodox ghost of Rachel ought to have been—but a man's, wearing dark clothes. There flashed into Dan's remembrance the frequent nightly visits of Robin Frost to the pond, bringing with it a ray of relief.

Robin had been looked upon as little better than a lunatic since the misfortune; but, to Dan Duff, he appeared in that moment worth his weight in gold. Robin's companionship was as good as any one's to ward off ghostly fears, and Dan set off, full speed, towards him. To go right up to the pond would take him a few yards out of his way to Bill Hook's. What of that? To exchange words with a human tongue, Dan, in that moment of superstitious fright, would have gone as many miles.

He had run more than half the distance, when he brought himself to a halt. It had become evident to Dan's sight that it was not Robin Frost. Whoever it might be, he was a head and shoulders

taller than Robin; and Dan moved up more quietly, his eyes strained forward in the moonlight. A suspicion came over him that it might be Mr. Verner: Dan could not at the moment remember any one else so tall, unless it was Mr. Jan. The figure stood now with its back to him; apparently gazing into the pool. Dan advanced with slow steps; if it was Mr. Verner, he would not presume to intrude upon him: but when he came nearly close to it, he saw that it bore no resemblance to the figure of Mr. Verner. Slowly, glidingly, the figure turned round; turned its face right upon Dan, full in the rays of the bright moon: and the most awful yell you ever heard went forth upon the still night air.

It came from Dan Duff. What could have been its meaning? Did he think he saw the ghost, which he had been looking out for for the last half-hour, poor Rachel's—saw it beyond this figure which had turned upon him? Dan alone knew. That he had fallen into the most appalling terror, was certain. His eyes were starting, drops of perspiration poured off him, and his hair rose up on end. The figure—just as if it had possessed neither sight nor hearing, neither sense nor sympathy for human sound—glided noiselessly away: and Dan went yelling on.

Towards home now. All thought of Bill Hook and the grey ferret was gone. Away he tore, the nearest way, which took him past the pound. He never saw the white cow: had the cow been a veritable ghost, Dan had not seen it then. The yells subsiding into moans, and the perspiration into fever heat, he gained his mother's; and broke the window, as you have heard, in passing in.

Such were the particulars; but as yet they were not known. The first person to elicit them was Roy the bailiff.

After Jan Verner had departed, saying he should be back by-and-by, and giving Mrs. Duff strict orders to keep the boy quiet, to allow no one near him but herself, and, above all, no questioning, Mrs. Duff left him. "that he might get a bit of sleep," she said. In point of fact, Mrs. Duff was burning to exercise her gossiping powers with those other gossipers below. To them she descended; and found Mrs. Peckaby holding forth upon the subject of the white cow.

"You're wrong, Susan Peckaby," said Mrs. Duff. "It wasn't the white cow at all; Dan wasn't nigh the pound. It was something he saw walking round the Willow Pond."

One of the present auditors was Roy the bailiff. He had only recently pushed in, and had stood listening in silence, taking note of the various comments and opinions.

"I have seen something myself to-night that is not over-kind," said Roy. "I'd like to get an inkling if it's the same that has frightened Dan."

"Was it in the pound?" eagerly asked Mrs. Peckaby.

"The pound be bothered!" was the polite answer vouchsafed by Roy. "Thee'll go mad with th' white donkey one of these days."

"There can't be any outlet to it, but one," observed Mrs. Chuff, the blacksmith's wife, giving her opinion in a loud key. "He must ha' seen Rachel Frost's ghost."

"Have *you* been and seen that to-night, Mr. Roy?" cried Susan Peckaby.

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," was Roy's satisfactory reply. "I'll just go and take a look at Dan, Mother Duff. No fear of my disturbing him."

The first thing Roy did, upon getting upstairs, was to shut the chamber door: the next, to arouse and question the suffering Dan. Roy succeeded in getting from him the particulars already related, and a little more: insomuch as that Dan mentioned the name which the dead man had borne in life.

Roy sat and stared at him after the revelation, keeping silence. It may have been that he was digesting the wonder: it may have been that he was deliberating upon his answer.

"Look you here, Dan Duff," said he, by-and-by, holding the shaking boy by the shoulder. "You just breathe that name again to living mortal, and see if you don't get hung up by the neck for it. 'Twas nothing but Rachel's ghost. Them ghosts takes the form of anything that it pleases 'em to take; whether it's a dead man's, or whether it's a woman's, what do they care? There's no ghost but Rachel's would be a-hovering over that pond. Where be your senses gone, not to know that?"

Poor Dan's senses appeared to be wandering somewhere yet: they certainly were not in him. He shook and moaned, and finally fell into the same sort of stupor as before. Roy could make nothing further of him, and went down.

"Well," said he to the assemblage, "I've got it out of him. The minute he saw me, he stretched his arm out—'Mr. Roy,' says he, 'I'm sick to unburden myself to somebody;' and he up and told. He's fell off again now, like one senseless, and I question if he'd remember telling me."

"And what was it?" questioned the chorus. "Rachel's ghost?"

"It was nothing less, you may be sure," replied Roy, his tone expressing contempt that they should have thought it could be anything less. "The young idiot must take and go by the pond on this bright night, and of course he saw it. Right again his face, he says, it appeared; there was no mistaking of it. It was walking round and round the pool."

Considerable shivering in the assembly. Polly Dawson, who was on its outskirts, shrieked and pushed into its midst, as if it

were a safer place. The women drew into a closer circle, and glanced round at an imaginary ghost behind their shoulders.

"Was it that as you saw yourself to-night, Mr. Roy?"

"Never mind me," was Roy's answer. "I ain't one to be startled to death at sight of a spirit, like boys and women are. I had my pill in what I saw, I can tell ye. And my advice to you all is, keep within your own doors after nightfall."

Without further salutation, Roy departed. The women, with one accord, began to make for the staircase. To contemplate one who had just been in actual contact with the ghost—which some infidels had persistently asserted throughout was nothing but a myth—was a sight not to be missed. But they were driven back again. With a succession of yells, the like of which had never been heard, except at the Willow Pond that night, Dan appeared leaping down upon them. To be left alone, a prey to ghosts or their remembrances, was more than the boy, with his consciousness upon him, could bear. The women fell back one upon another: not a few being under the impression that it was the ghost itself.

What was to be done with him? Before the question was finally decided, Mrs. Bascroft, the landlady of the Plough and Harrow, who had made one of the company, went off to her bar, whence she hastened back again with an immense hot tumbler, three parts brandy, one part water, the whole of which was poured down Dan's throat.

"There's nothing like it for restoring folk after a fright," remarked Mrs. Bascroft.

The result of the dose was, that Dan Duff subsided into a state of real stupor, so profound and prolonged that even Jan began to doubt whether he would ever awake from it.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. AND MRS. VERNER.

LIONEL VERNER sat over his morning letters, bending upon one of them a perplexed brow. A claim which he had settled the previous spring—at least, which he believed had been settled—was now forwarded to him again. That there was very little limit to his wife's extravagance, he had begun to realize.

In spite of Sibylla's extensive purchases, made in Paris at the time of their marriage, she had contrived by the end of the following winter to run up a tolerable bill at her London milliner's. When they had gone to town in the early spring, this bill got presented to Lionel. Four hundred and odd pounds. He gave

Sibylla a cheque for its amount, and some gentle loving words of admonition at the same time—not to spend him out of house and home.

A second account from the same milliner had arrived this morning—been delivered to him with other London letters. Why it should have been sent to him and not to his wife, he was unable to tell—unless it was meant as a genteel hint that payment would be acceptable. The whole amount was for eleven hundred pounds, but part of this purported to be "To bill delivered"—four hundred and odd pounds. The precise sum which Lionel believed to have been paid. Eleven hundred pounds! and all the other claims upon him! No wonder he sat with a bent brow. If things went on at this rate, Verner's Pride would come to the hammer.

He rose, the account in his hand, and proceeded to his wife's dressing-room. Among other habits, Sibylla was falling into that of indolence, scarcely ever rising to breakfast now. Or, if she rose, she did not come down. Mademoiselle Benoite came whisking out of a side room as he was about to enter.

"Madame's toilette is not made, sir," cried she, tartly, as if she thought he had no right to enter.

"What of that?" returned Lionel. And he went in.

Just as she had got out of bed, save that she had a blue quilted silk dressing-gown thrown on, and her feet were thrust into blue quilted slippers, sat Sibylla, before a good fire. She leaned in an easy-chair, reading; a miniature breakfast-service of Sèvres china, containing chocolate, on a low table at her side. Some people like to read a word or two of the Bible, as soon as it may be convenient, after getting up in the morning. Was that good book the study of Sibylla? Not at all. Her study was a French novel. By dint of patience, and the assistance of Mademoiselle Benoite in the hard words and complicated sentences, Mrs. Verner contrived to arrive tolerably at its sense.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, when Lionel appeared, "and you not gone shooting with the rest?"

"I did not go this morning," he answered, closing the door, and approaching her.

"Have you taken breakfast?" she asked.

"Breakfast has been over a long while. Were I you, Sibylla, when I had guests staying in the house, I should try and rise to breakfast with them."

"Oh, you crafty Lionel! To save you the trouble of presiding. Thank you," she continued, good-humouredly, "I am more comfortable here. What is this story about a ghost? The kitchen's in a regular commotion, Benoite says."

"To what do you allude?" asked Lionel.

"Dan Duff is dying, or dead," returned Sibylla. "Benoite was in Deerham last night, and brought him home to carry her parcels. In going back again, he saw, as he says, Rachel Frost's ghost, and it terrified him out of his senses. Old Roy saw it, too, and the news has travelled up here."

Sibylla laughed as she spoke. Lionel looked vexed.

"They are very stupid," he said. "A pity but they kept such stories to themselves. If they were only as quiet as poor Rachel's ghost is, it might be better for some of them."

"Of course *you* would wish it kept quiet," said Sibylla, in a tone full of significance. "I like to hear of these frights—it is good fun."

He did not fathom in the remotest degree her meaning. But he had not gone thither to dispute about ghosts.

"Sibylla," he gravely said, putting the open account into her hand, "I have received this bill this morning."

Sibylla ran her eyes over it with indifference: first at the bill's head, to see whence it came, next at its sum total.

"What an old cheat! Eleven hundred pounds! I am sure I have not had the half."

Lionel pointed to the part "bill delivered." "Was that not paid in the spring?"

"How can I recollect?" returned Sibylla, speaking as carelessly as before.

"I think you may recollect if you try. I gave you a cheque for the amount."

"Oh yes, I do recollect now. It has not been paid."

"But, my dear, I say I gave a cheque for it."

"I cashed the cheque myself. I wanted some money just then. You can't think how fast money goes in London, Lionel."

The avowal proved only what he suspected. Nevertheless, it hurt him greatly—grieved him to his heart's core. Not so much spending the money, as keeping the fact from him. What a want of good feeling, of confidence, it proved.

He bent towards her, speaking gently, kindly. Whatever might be her faults to him, her provocations, he could never behave otherwise to her than as a thorough gentleman, a kind husband.

"It was not right to use that cheque, Sibylla. It was made out in Madame Lebeau's name, and should have been paid to her. But why did you not tell me?"

Sibylla shrugged her shoulders in place of answering. She had picked up many such little national habits from Mademoiselle Benoite. Very conspicuous just then was the upright line on Lionel's brow.

"The amount altogether is, you perceive, eleven hundred pounds" he continued.

"Yes," said Sibylla. "She's a cheat, that Madame Lebeau. I shall make Benoite write her a letter in French, and tell her so."

"It must be paid. But it is a great deal of money. I cannot continue to pay these large sums, Sibylla. I have not the money to do it with."

"Not the money! When you know you are paying heaps for Lady Verner! Before you tell me not to spend, you should cease supplying her."

Lionel's very brow flushed. "My mother has a claim upon me only in a degree less than you have," he gravely said. "Part of the revenues of Verner's Pride ought to have been hers years ago; and they were not."

"If my husband had lived—if he had left me a little child—Verner's Pride would have been his and mine, and never yours at all."

"Hush, Sibylla! You don't know how these allusions hurt me," he interrupted in a tone of intense pain.

"They are true," said Sibylla.

"But not—forgive me, my dear, for saying it—not the less unseemly."

"Why do you grumble at me, then?"

"I do not grumble," he answered kindly. "Your interests are mine, Sibylla, and mine are yours. I only tell you the fact—and a fact it is—that our income will not stand these heavy calls upon it. Were I to show you how much you have spent in dress since we were married,—what with Paris, London, and Heartbury,—the sum total would frighten you."

"You should not keep the sum total," resentfully spoke Sibylla. "Why do you add it up?"

"I must keep my accounts correctly. My uncle taught me that."

"I am sure he did not teach you to grumble at me," she rejoined. "I look upon Verner's Pride as mine, more than yours: if it had not been for the death of my husband, you would never have had it."

Inexpressibly vexed—vexed beyond the power to answer, for he would not trust himself to answer—Lionel prepared to leave the room. He began to wish he had not had Verner's Pride, if this was to be a specimen of its domestic peace.

As Lionel was strolling out later in the day, he met the shooting-party coming home. After congratulating them on their good sport, he was turning home with them, when the gamekeeper intimated that he should be glad to speak a word to him in private. Upon which, Lionel let the gentlemen go on.

"What is it, Broom?" asked he.

"I'm much afeard, sir, if things are not altered, that there'll be

murder committed some night," answered Broom, without circumlocution.

"I hope not," replied Lionel. "Are you and the poachers again at issue?"

"It's not about the poachers, hang 'em! It's about Robin Frost, sir. What on earth has come to him I can't conceive. This last few nights he has took to prowling out with a gun. He lays himself down in the copse, or ditch, or the open field—no matter where—and there he stops, on the watch, with his gun always pointed."

"On the watch for what?" asked Lionel.

"He best knows himself, sir. He's going quite cracked, it's my belief; he's been half-way to it this long while. Sometimes he's trailing through the brushwood on all fours, the gun always pointed; but mostly he's posted on the watch. He'll get shot for a poacher, or some of the poachers will shoot him, as sure as it's a gun that he carries."

"What can be his motive?" mused Lionel.

"I'm inclined to think, sir, though he is Robin Frost, that he's after the birds," boldly returned Broom.

"Then rely upon it that you think wrong, Broom," rebuked Lionel. "Robin Frost would no more go out poaching, than I should go out thieving."

"I saw him trailing along last night in the moonlight, sir. I saw his old father come up and talk to him, urging him to go home, as it seemed to me. But he couldn't get him; and the old man had to hobble back without Robin. Robin stopped in his cold berth on the ground."

"I did not think old Matthew was capable of going out at night."

"He did last night, sir; that's certain. It was not far; only down away by the brick-kilns. There's a tale going abroad that Dan Duff was sent into mortal fright by seeing something that he took to be Rachel's ghost: my opinion is, that he must have met old Frost in his white smock-frock, and took him for a ghost. The moon did cast an uncommon white shade last night. Though old Frost wasn't nigh the Willow Pool, nor Robin neither, and that's where they say Dan Duff got his fright. Formerly, Robin was always round that pool, but lately he has changed his beat. Anyhow, sir, perhaps you'd be so good as drop a warning to Robin of the risk he runs. He may mind you."

"I will," said Lionel.

The gamekeeper touched his hat, and walked away. Lionel considered that he might as well give Robin the warning then: and he turned towards the village. Before fairly entering it, he

had met twenty talkative persons, who gave him twenty different versions of the previous night's doings, touching Dan Duff.

Mrs. Duff was at her door when Lionel went by. She generally was at her door, unless she was serving customers. He stopped to accost her.

"What's the truth of this affair, Mrs. Duff?" asked he. "I have heard many reports of it?"

Mrs. Duff gave as clear an account as it was in her nature to give. Some would have told it in a third of the time: but Lionel had patience; he was in no particular hurry.

"I have been one of them to laugh at the ghost, sir; saying that it never was Rachel's, and that it never walked," she added. "But I'll never do so again. Roy, he saw it, as well as Dan."

"Oh! he saw it too, did he," responded Lionel, with a good-natured smile of mockery. "Mrs. Duff, you ought to be too old to believe in ghosts," he more seriously resumed. "I am sure Roy is, whatever he may choose to say."

"If it was no ghost, sir, what could have put our Dan into that awful fright? Mr. Jan doesn't know as he'll overget it at all. He's lying without a bit of conscientiousness on my bed, his eyes shut, and his breath coming hard."

"Something frightened him, no doubt. The belief in poor Rachel's ghost has been so popular, that every night fright is attributed to that. Who was it went into a fainting-fit in the road, fancying Rachel's ghost was walking down upon them; and it proved afterwards to have been only the miller's man with a sack of flour on his back?"

"Oh, that!" slightingly returned Mrs. Duff. "It was that stupid Mother Grind, before they went off with the Mormons. She'd drop at her shadder, sir, she would."

"So would some of the rest of you," said Lionel. "I am sorry to hear that Dan is so ill."

"Mr. Jan's in a fine way over him, sir. Mrs. Bascroft gave him just a taste of weak brandy-and-water, and Mr. Jan, when he come to know it, said we might just as well have given him pison; and he'd not answer for his life or his reason. A pretty thing it'll be for Deerham, if there's more lives to be put in danger, now the ghost has took to walk again! Mr. Bourne called in just now, sir, to learn the rights of it. He went up and saw Dan: but nothing could he make of him. Would you be pleased to go up and take a look at him, sir?"

Lionel declined, and wished Mrs. Duff good day.

He could do the boy no good, and had no especial wish to look at him, although he had been promoted to the notoriety of seeing a ghost. A few steps further on he encountered Jan.

"What is the matter with the boy?" asked Lionel.

"He had a good fright; there's no doubt about that," replied Jan. "Saw a white cow on its hind legs, it's my belief. That wouldn't have been much: the boy would have been all right by now, but the women drenched him with brandy, and made him stupidly drunk. He'll be better this evening. I can't stop, Lionel: I am run off my legs to-day."

The commotion in the village increased as evening approached. Jan knew that young Dan would be well—save for any little remembrance of the fright which might remain—when the fumes of the brandy had gone off; but he wisely kept his own counsel, and let the public think he was in danger. Otherwise, a second instalment of the brandy might have been administered behind Jan's back. To have a boy dying of fright from seeing a ghost, was a treat in the marvellous line which Deerham had never yet enjoyed. There had been no similar agitation, since the day of poor Rachel Frost.

Brave spirits, some of them! They volunteered to go out and meet the apparition. As twilight approached you could not have got into Mrs. Duff's shop, for there was the chief gathering. Arguments were being used to prove that, according to all logic, if a ghost appeared one night, it was safe to appear a second.

"Who'll speak up to go and watch for it?" asked Mrs. Duff. "I can't. I can't leave Dan. Sally Green's sitting up by him now; for Mr. Jan says if he's left again, he shall hold me responsible. It don't stand to reason that I can leave Sally Green in charge of the shop, though I can leave her a bit with Dan. Not but what I'd go alone to the pond, and stop there; *I* haven't any fear."

It happened most singularly that those who were kept at home by domestic or other duties, had no fear; they, to hear them talk, would rather have enjoyed an encounter *solus* with the ghost, than otherwise. Those who could plead no home engagement professed themselves willing to undertake the expedition in company; but freely avowed they would not go alone for the world.

"Come! who'll volunteer?" asked Mrs. Duff. "It 'ud be a great satisfaction to see the form it appears in, and have that set at rest. Dan will never be able to tell, by the looks of him now."

"I'll go for one," said bold Mrs. Bascroft. "And those as join me shall each have a good stiff tumbler of something hot before starting, to prime 'em again the cold."

Whether it was the brave example set, or whether it was the promise accompanying it, certain it was, that there was no lack of volunteers now. A good round dozen started, filling up the Plough-and-Harrow bar, as Mrs. Bascroft dealt out her treat with no niggardly hand.

"What's a-doing now?" asked Bascroft, a stupid-looking man, with red hair combed straight down his forehead, and coloured shirt-sleeves, surveying the inroad on his premises with surprise.

"Never you mind," sharply reproved his better half. "These ladies are my visitors, and if I choose to stand treat all round, what's that to you? You takes *your* share of liquor, Bascroft."

Bascroft was not held in very great estimation by the ladies generally, and they turned their backs upon him.

"We are going out to see the ghost, if you must know, Bascroft," said Susan Peckaby, who made one of the volunteers.

Bascroft stared. "What a set of idiots you must be!" grunted he. "Mr. Jan says Dan Duff saw nothing but a white cow: he told me so himself. Be you thinking to meet that there other white animal on your road, Mrs. Peckaby?"

"Perhaps I am," tartly returned Mrs. Peckaby.

"One 'ud think so. *You* can't want to go out to meet ghostesses; you're going out to your saints at New Jerusalem. I'd whack that there donkey for being so slow, when he did come, if I was you."

Hastening away from Bascroft and his aggravation, the expedition, having drained their tumblers, filed out. Down by the pound—relieved now of its caged inmate—went they, on towards the Willow Pond. The tumblers had made them brave. The night was light, as the preceding one had been: the ground looked white, as if with frost, and the air was cold. The pond in view, they halted and took a furtive glance, beginning to feel somewhat chilled. So far as these half glances allowed them to judge, there appeared to be nothing near to it, nothing upon its brink or elsewhere.

"It's of no good marching right up to it," said Mrs. Jones, the baker's wife. "The ghost mightn't come at all, if it saw us all there. Let's go inside the trees."

Mrs. Jones meant inside the grove. The proposition was most acceptable, and they took up their position, the pond in view, peeping out, and conversing in whispers. By-and-by they heard the church clock strike eight.

"I wish it would make haste," exclaimed Susan Peckaby, with some impatience. "I don't ever like to be away from home long together, for fear of that there blessed white animal arriving."

"He'd wait, wouldn't he?" sarcastically rejoined Polly Dawson. "You——"

A prolonged hush—sh—sh! from the rest, restored silence. Something was rustling the trees at a distance. They huddled closer together, and caught hold one of another.

Nothing appeared. The alarm went off. And they waited, without result, until the clock struck nine. The artificial strength within them had cooled by that time, their ardour had cooled, and they

were feeling chilled and tired. Susan Peckaby was upon thorns, she said, and urged their departure.

"*You* can go if you like," was the answer. "Nobody wants to keep you."

Susan Peckaby measured the distance between the pond and the way she had to go, and came to the determination to risk it.

"I'll make a rush for it, I think," said she. "I shan't see nothing. For all I know, that quadruple may be right before our door now. If he—— "

Susan Peckaby stopped, her voice subsiding into a shriek. She, and those with her, became simultaneously aware that some white figure was bearing down upon them. The shrieks grew terrible.

It proved to be Roy in his white fustian jacket. Roy had never had the privilege of hearing a dozen women shriek in concert before; at least, like this. His loud derisive laugh was excessively aggravating. What with that, what with the fright his appearance had really put them into, they all tore off, leaving some hard words for him; and never stopped to take breath until they burst into Mrs. Duff's shop.

It was rather an ignominious way of returning, and Mrs. Duff did not spare her comments. If she had went out to meet the ghost, she'd have stopped till the ghost came, *she* would! Mrs. Jones rejoined that watched-for ghosts, as she had heard, never did come —which she had said so before she went out!

Master Dan, considerably recovered, was downstairs then. Rather pale and shaky, and accommodated with a chair and pillow, in front of the kitchen fire. The expedition pressed into the kitchen, and five hundred questions were lavished upon the boy.

"What was it dressed in, Dan? Did you get a good sight of her face, Dan? Did it look just as Rachel used to look? Speak up, Dan."

"It wasn't Rachel at all," replied Dan.

This unexpected assertion brought a pause of discomfiture. "He's head ain't right yet," observed Mrs. Duff, apologetically; "and that's why I've asked him nothing."

"Yes, it is right, mother," said Dan. "I never see Rachel last night. I never said as I did."

Another pause: spent in contemplating Dan. "I knew a case like this, once before," observed old Miss Till, who carried round the milk to Deerham. "A boy got a fright, and they couldn't bring him to at all. Epsom salts did it at last. Three pints they give him, I think it was, and that brought his mind round."

"It's a good remedy," acquiesced Mrs. Jones. "There's nothing like plenty of Epsom salts for boys. I'd try 'em on him, Mother Duff."

"Dan, dear," said Susan Peckaby, insinuatingly—for she had come in with the rest, ignoring for the moment what might be waiting at her door, "was it in the pound that you saw Rachel's ghost?"

"'Twasn't Rachel's ghost," persisted Dan.

"Tell us whose it was, then?" asked she, humouring him.

The boy answered. But he answered below his breath; as if he scarcely dare speak the name aloud. His mother partially caught it.

"Whose?" she exclaimed sharply, her tone changing. And Dan spoke a little louder.

"It was Mr. Fred Massingbird's!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MATTHEW FROST'S NIGHT ENCOUNTER.

OLD Matthew Frost sat in his room at the back of the kitchen. It was his bedroom and sitting-room combined. Since he had grown feeble, the bustle of the kitchen and of Robin's family disturbed him, and he sat much in his chamber, where they frequently took his dinner in to him.

A thoroughly comfortable arm-chair had Matthew. It had been the gift of Lionel Verner. At his elbow was a small round table of very dark wood, rubbed to brightness. On that table Matthew's large Bible might generally be found open, and Matthew's spectacles bending over it. But the Bible was closed to-day. He sat in deep thought. His hands clasped upon his stick—something after the manner of old Mr. Verner; and his eyes fixed through the open window at the September sun, as it played on the gooseberry and currant bushes in the cottage garden.

The door opened, and Robin's wife—her hands and arms white, for she was kneading dough—appeared, showing in Lionel. He had come on after his conversation with Mrs. Duff, which you read in the last chapter; for it is necessary to go back a few hours. The old man rose, and stood leaning on his stick.

"Sit down, Matthew," said Lionel, in a kindly tone. "Don't let me disturb you." He made him go back to his seat again, and took a chair opposite to him.

"The time's gone, sir, for me to stand before you. That time must go for us all."

"Ay, that it must, Matthew, if we live. I came in to speak to Robin. His wife says she does not know where he is."

"He's here, there, and everywhere," was old Matthew's answer.

"One never knows how to take him, sir, or when to see him. My late master's bounty to me, sir, is keeping us in comfort, but I often ask Robin what he'll do when I am gone. It gives me many an hour's care, sir. Robin don't earn the half of a living now."

"Be easy, Matthew," was Lionel's answer. "I am not sure that the annuity, or part of it, will not be continued to Robin. My uncle left it in my charge to do as I should see well. I have never mentioned it, even to you: and I think it might be as well for you not to speak of it to Robin. It is to be hoped that he will get steady and hard-working again: were he to hear that there was a chance of his being kept without work, he might never become so."

"The Lord bless my old master!" aspirated Matthew, lifting his hands. "The Lord bless you, sir! There's not many gentlemen would do for us what he and you have done."

Lionel bent forward, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Matthew, what is this that I hear, of Robin's going about the grounds at night with a loaded gun?"

Matthew threw up his hands. Not with the reverence of the past moment, but with a gesture of despair. "Heaven knows what he does it for, sir! I'd keep him in: but it's beyond me."

"I know you would. You went yourself after him last night, Broom tells me."

Matthew's eyes fell. He hesitated much in his answer. "I—yes, sir,—I—I couldn't get him home. It's a pity."

"You got as far as the brick-kilns, I hear. I was surprised. I don't think you should be out at night, Matthew."

"No, sir, I am not going again."

The words this time were spoken readily enough. But, from some cause or other, the old man was evidently embarrassed. His eyes were not lifted, and his clear face had turned red. Lionel searched his imagination for a reason, and could only connect it with his son.

"Matthew," said he, "I am about to ask you a painful question. I hope you will answer it. Is Robin perfectly sane?"

"Ay, sir, as sane as I am. Unsettled he is, ever dwelling on poor Rachel, ever thinking of revenge: but his senses are as much his as they ever were. I wish his mind could be set at rest."

"At rest in what way?"

"As to who it was that did the harm to Rachel. He has had it in his head for a long while, sir, that it was Mr. John Massingbird: but he can't be certain, and it's the uncertainty that keeps his mind on the worry."

"Do you know where he picked up the notion that it was Mr

John Massingbird?" inquired Lionel, remembering the conversation on the same point that Robin had once held with him, on that very garden-bench, in front of which he and Matthew were now sitting.

Old Matthew shook his head. "I never could learn, sir. Robin's a dutiful son to me, but he'd never tell me that. I know that Mr. John Massingbird has been like a pill in his throat this many a day. Oftentimes have I felt thankful that he was dead, or Robin would surely have gone out to where he was, and murdered him. Murder wouldn't mend the ill, sir—as I have told him many a time."

"Indeed it would not," replied Lionel. "The very fact of Mr. John Massingbird's being dead, should have the effect of setting Robin's mind at rest—if it was towards him that his suspicions were directed. For my part, I think Robin is wrong in suspecting him."

"I think so too, sir. I don't know how it is, but I can't bring my mind to suspect him more than anybody else. I have thought over things in this light, and I have thought them over in that light; and I would rather incline to believe that she got acquainted with some stranger, poor dear! than that it was anybody known to us. Robin is in doubt: he has had some cause given him to suspect Mr. John Massingbird, but he is not sure, and it's that doubt, I say, that worries him."

"At any rate, doubt or no doubt, there is no need for him to go about at night with a gun. What does he do it for?"

"I have asked him, sir, and he does not answer. He seems to me to be on the watch."

"On the watch for what?" rejoined Lionel.

"I'm sure I don't know," said old Matthew. "If you'd say a word to him, sir, it might stop it. He got a foolish notion into his mind that poor Rachel's spirit might come again, and he used to be about the pond pretty near every moonlight night. That fancy passed off, and he has gone to bed at night as the rest of us have, up to the last week or so, when he has taken to go out again, and to carry a gun."

"It was a foolish notion," remarked Lionel. "The dead do not come again, Matthew."

Matthew made no reply.

"I must try and come across Robin," said Lionel, rising. "I wish you would tell him to come up to me, Matthew."

"Sir, if you desire that he shall wait upon you at Verner's Pride, he will be sure to do so," said the old man, leaning on his stick as he stood. "He has not got to the length of disobeying an order of yours. I'll tell him."

It happened that Lionel did "come across" Robin Frost. Not to any effect, however, for he could not manage to speak to him. Lionel was striking across some fields towards Deerham Court, when he came in view of Roy and Robin Frost leaning over a gate, their heads together in close confab. It looked very much as though they were talking secrets. They looked up and saw him; but when he reached the place, both were gone. Roy was in sight, but the other had disappeared. Lionel lifted his voice.

"Roy, I want you."

Roy could not feign deafness, although there was every appearance that he would like to do it. He turned and approached, touching his hat in a half surly manner.

"Where's Robin Frost?"

"Robin Frost, sir? He was here a minute or two agone. I met him accidental, and stopped him to ask what he was about, that he hadn't been at work this three days. He went on his way then, down the gap. Did you want him, sir?"

Lionel Verner's perceptive faculties were tolerably developed. That Roy was endeavouring to blind him, he had no doubt. They had not met "accidental," and the topic of conversation had not been Robin's work—of that he felt sure. Roy and Robin Frost might meet and talk together all day long—it was nothing to him: why they should try to deceive him was the only curious thing about it. Both had striven to avoid meeting him; and Roy was talking to him now unwillingly. In a general way, Robin Frost was fond of meeting and receiving a word from Mr. Verner.

"I shall see him another time," carelessly remarked Lionel. "Not so fast, Roy,"—for the man was turning away—"I have not done with you. Will you be good enough to inform me what you were doing in front of my house last night?"

"I wasn't doing anything, sir. I wasn't there."

"Oh yes, you were," said Lionel. "Recollect yourself. You were posted under the large yew-tree on the lawn, watching my drawing-room windows."

Roy looked up at this, the most intense surprise in his countenance. "I never was on your lawn last night, sir; I wasn't near it. At least not nearer than the side field. I happened to be in that, and I got through a gap in the hedge, on to the high-road."

"Roy, I believe that you *were* on the lawn last night, and that you were watching the house," persisted Lionel, looking fixedly at him. For the life of him he could not tell whether the man's surprise was genuine, his denial real. "What business had you there?"

"I declare to goodness, if it was the last word I had to speak, that I was not on your lawn, sir,—that I did not watch the house.

I did not go near the house. I crossed the side field, and got out into the road; and that's the nearest I was to the house last night."

Roy spoke unusually impressively for him, and Lionel began to believe that, so far, he was telling truth. He made no immediate reply, and Roy resumed.

"What reason have you to accuse me, sir? I shouldn't be likely to watch your house—why should I?"

"Some man was watching it," replied Lionel. "As you were seen in the road shortly afterwards, close to the side field, I came to the conclusion that it was you."

"I can be upon my oath that it wasn't, sir," answered Roy.

"Very well," replied Lionel, "I accept your denial. But allow me to give you a recommendation, Roy,—not to trouble yourself with my affairs in any way. They do not concern you; they never will concern you; therefore, don't meddle with them."

He walked away as he spoke. Roy stood and gazed after him, a strange expression on his countenance. Had Lucy Tempest seen it, she might have renewed her warning to Lionel. And yet she would have been puzzled to read the meaning of the expression, for it did not look like a threatening one.

Had Lionel Verner turned up Clay Lane, upon leaving Matthew Frost's cottage; instead of down it, to cross the fields at the back, he would have encountered the Vicar of Deerham. That gentleman was paying parochial visits that day in Deerham, and in due course came to Matthew Frost's. He and Matthew had long been upon confidential terms: the clergyman respected Matthew, and Matthew revered his pastor.

Mr. Bourne took the seat Lionel had but recently vacated. He was so accustomed to the old man's habitual countenance that he could detect every change in it: and he saw that something was troubling him.

"I am troubled in more ways than one, sir," was the old man's answer. "Poor Robin is giving me trouble again: and last night, sir, I had a sort of fright. A shock, it may be said. I can't overget it."

"What was its nature?" asked Mr. Bourne.

"I don't much like to speak of it, sir: and, beside yourself, there's not a living man I'd open my lips to. It's an unpleasant thing to have upon the mind. Mr. Verner was here but a few minutes ago, and I felt before him like a guilty man that has something to conceal. When I have told you, sir, you'll be hard of belief."

"Is it connected with Robin?"

"No, sir. But it was my going after Robin that led to it, as may

be said. Robin, sir, has took these last few nights to go out with a gun. It has worried me so, sir, fearing some mischief might ensue, that I couldn't sleep; and last evening, I thought I'd hobble out and see if I couldn't get him home. Chuff said he had seen him go towards the brickfield, and I managed to get as far; and, sure enough, I came upon Robin. He was lying at the edge of the field, watching, as it seemed to me. I couldn't get him home, sir. I tried hard, but it was of no use. He spoke respectfully to me, as he always does: 'Father, I have my work to do, and I must do it. You go back home, and go to sleep in quiet.' It was all I could get from him, sir, and at last I turned——"

"What was Robin doing?" interrupted Mr. Bourne.

"Sir, I suppose it's just some fancy or other he has got into his head, as he used to get after the poor child died. Mr. Verner has just asked me whether he is sane, but there's nothing of that sort wrong about him. You mind the clump of trees that stands out, sir, between here and the brickfield, by the path that would lead to Verner's Pride?" added old Matthew, in an altered tone.

"Yes," said Mr. Bourne.

"I had just got past it, sir, when I saw a figure crossing that bare corner from the other trees. It looked like a man's shape, tall and shadowy, wearing what looked like a long garment, a coat or a woman's riding-habit, almost trailing the ground. The very moment my eyes fell upon it, I felt that it was something strange, and when the figure passed me, turning its face right upon me—I *saw* the face, sir."

Old Matthew's manner was so peculiar, his pause so impressive, that Mr. Bourne could only gaze at him, and wait in wonder for what was coming.

"Sir, it was the face of one who has been dead these two years past—Mr. Frederick Massingbird."

If the Rector had gazed at old Matthew before, he could only stare now. That the calm, sensible old man should fall into so extraordinary a delusion was incomprehensible. He might have believed it of Deerham in general, but not of Matthew Frost.

"Matthew, you must have been deceived," was his quiet answer.

"No, sir. There never was another face like Mr. Frederick Massingbird's. Other features may have been made like his—it's not for me to say they have not—but whose else would have the black mark upon it? The moonlight was full upon it, and I could see even the little lines shooting out from the cheek, so bright was the night. The face was turned right upon me as it passed, and I am as clear about its being his as I am that it was myself looking at it."

"But you know it is a thing absolutely impossible," urged Mr. Bourne. "I think you must have dreamt this, Matthew."

Old Matthew shook his head. "I wouldn't have told you a dream, sir. It turned me all in a maze. I never felt the fatigue of a step all the way home after it. When I got in, I couldn't eat my supper; I couldn't go to bed. I sat up thinking, and the wife came in and asked what ailed me that I didn't go to rest. I had no sleep in my eyes, I told her, which was true: for, when I did get to bed, it was hours before I could close 'em."

"But, Matthew, I tell you that it is impossible. You must have been mistaken."

"Sir, until last night, had any one told me such a thing, I should have said it was impossible. You know, sir, I have never been given to such fancies. There's no doubt, sir; there's *no doubt* that it was the spirit of Mr. Frederick Massingbird."

Matthew's clear, intelligent eye was fixed firmly on Mr. Bourne's—his face, as usual, bent a little forward. Mr. Bourne had never believed in "spirits:" clergymen, as a rule, do not. A half smile crossed his lips.

"Were you frightened?" he asked.

"I was not frightened, sir, in the sense that you, perhaps, put the question. I was surprised; startled. As I might have been surprised and startled at seeing anybody I least expected to see—somebody that I had thought was miles away. Since poor Rachel's death, sir, I have lived, so to say, in communion with spirits: what with Robin's talking of his hope to see *hers*, and my constantly thinking of her; knowing also that it can't be long, in the course of nature, before I am one myself, I have grown to be, as it were, familiar with the dead in my mind. Thus, sir, in that sense, no fear came upon me last night. I don't think, sir, I should feel fear at meeting or being alone with a spirit, any more than I should at meeting a man. But I was startled and disturbed."

"Matthew," cried Mr. Bourne, in some perplexity, "I had always believed you superior to these foolish things. Ghosts might do well enough for the old days, but the world has grown older and wiser. At any rate, the greater portion of it has."

"If you mean, sir, that I was superior to the belief in ghosts, you are right. I never had a grain of faith in such superstition in my life; and I have tried all means to convince my son what folly it was to hover about the Willow Pond, with any thought that Rachel might 'come again.' No, sir, I have never been given to it."

"And yet you deliberately assure me, Matthew, that you saw a ghost last night!"

"Sir, that it was Mr. Frederick Massingbird, dead or alive, that I saw, I must hold to. We know that he is dead, sir: his wife

buried him in that far land; so what am I to believe? The face looked ghastly: not like a person's living."

Mr. Bourne mused. That Frederick Massingbird was dead and buried, there could not be the slightest doubt. He hardly knew what to make of old Matthew. The latter resumed.

"Had I been flurried or terrified by it, sir, so as to lose my presence of mind, or if I was one of those timid folk that see signs in dreams, or take every white post for a ghost, that they come to on a dark night, you might laugh and disbelieve me. But I tell you this, sir, as you say, deliberately: just as it happened. I can't have much longer time to live, sir; but I'd stake it all on the truth that it was the spirit of Mr. Frederick Massingbird. When you have once known a man, there are a hundred points by which you may recognize him, beyond possibility of being mistaken. They have a story in the place, sir, to-day—you may have heard it—that my poor child's ghost appeared to Dan Duff last night, and that the boy has been senseless ever since. It has struck me, sir, that perhaps he also saw what I saw."

Mr. Bourne paused. "Did you say anything of this to Mr. Verner?"

"Not I, sir. As I tell you, I felt like a guilty man in his presence, one with something to hide. He married Mr. Fred's widow, pretty creature, and it don't seem a nice thing to tell him. If it had been the other gentleman's spirit, Mr. John's, I should have told him at once."

Mr. Bourne rose. To argue with old Matthew in his present frame of mind appeared to be about as useless a waste of time as to argue with Mrs. Peckaby on the subject of the white donkey. He told him he would see him again in a day or two, and took his departure.

But he did not dismiss the subject from his thoughts. No, he could not do that. He was puzzled. Such a tale from one like old Matthew—calm, pious, sensible, and verging on the grave, made more impression on Mr. Bourne than all Deerham could have made. Had Deerham come to him with the story, he would have flung it to the winds.

He began to think that some person, from evil design or love of mischief, must be personating Frederick Massingbird. It was a natural conclusion to come to. And Matthew's surmise, that the same thing might have alarmed Dan Duff, was perfectly probable. Mr. Bourne determined to ascertain the latter fact, as soon as Dan should be in a state of sufficient convalescence, bodily and mentally, to give an account. He had already paid one visit to Mrs. Duff's—as that lady informed Lionel.

Two or three more visits he paid there during the day, but not

until night did he find Dan revived. In point of fact, the clergyman penetrated to the kitchen just after that startling communication had been made by Dan. The women were standing in consternation when the Rector entered: one of them strongly recommending that the copper furnace should be heated, and Dan plunged into it to "bring him round."

"How is he now?" began Mr. Bourne. "Oh! I see he is sensible again."

"Well, sir, I don't know," said Mrs. Duff. "I'm afraid his head's a-going right off. He persists in saying now that it wasn't the ghost of Rachel at all—but somebody else's."

"If he was put into a good hot furnace, sir, and kep' at a even heat up to biling pint for half-an-hour—that is, as near biling as he could bear it—I know it would do wonders," spoke up Mrs. Chuff. "It's an excellent remedy, where there's a furnace convenient, and water is not short."

"Suppose you allow me to be alone with him for a few minutes," suggested Mr. Bourne. "We will try and find out what will cure him, won't we, Dan?"

The women filed out one by one. Mr. Bourne sat down by the boy, and took his hand. He talked soothingly to him, and drew from him by gentle degrees the whole tale, so far as Dan's memory and belief went. The boy shook in every limb as he told it. He could not boast immunity from ghostly fears, as did old Matthew Frost.

"But, my boy, you should know that there are no such things as ghosts," urged Mr. Bourne. "When once the dead have left this world, they do not come back to it again."

"I see it, sir," was Dan's only argument—an all-sufficient one with him. "It stood over the pool, and it turned round right upon me as I went up. I see the porkypine on his cheek, sir, as plain as anything."

The same account as old Matthew's!

"How was the person dressed?" asked Mr. Bourne. "Did you notice?"

"It had on some'at long—a coat or a skirt. It was as thin as thin, sir."

"Dan, shall I tell you what it was—as I believe? It was someone dressed up to frighten you and other timid persons."

Dan shook his head. "No, sir, it wasn't. It was the ghost of Mr Frederick Massingbird."

CHAPTER XLIX.

MASTER CHEESE'S FRIGHT.

STRANGE rumours began to be rife in Deerham. The extraordinary news told by Dan Duff would have been ascribed to some peculiar hallucination of that young gentleman's brain, and there's no knowing but that the furnace might have been tried as a cure, had not other testimony arisen to corroborate it. Four or five different people, in the course of as many days—or rather nights—saw, or professed to see, the apparition of Frederick Massingbird.

One of them was Master Cheese. He was returning one night from a professional visit—in slight, straightforward cases Jan could trust him—when he saw by the roadside what appeared to be a man standing up under the hedge, as if he had taken his station there to gaze at the passers-by.

"Up to no good," quoth Master Cheese to himself. "I'll go and dislodge the fellow."

Accordingly Master Cheese turned off the path, and crossed the waste bit—only a yard or two wide—that ran by the roadside. Master Cheese, it must be confessed, did not want for bravery; he would a great deal rather face danger of any kind than hard work; and the rumour about Fred Massingbird's ghost had been rare nuts for him to crack. Up he went, having no thought at that moment of ghosts, but rather of poachers.

"I say, you fellow——" he was beginning, and there he stopped dead.

He stopped dead, both in step and tongue. The figure, never moving, never giving the faintest indication that it was alive, stood there like a statue. Master Cheese looked in its face, and saw the face of the late Frederick Massingbird.

It is *not* pleasant to come across a dead man at moonlight—a man whose body has been safely reposing in the ground for the past two years or so. Master Cheese did not howl as Dan Duff had done. He set off down the road: he was too fat to force himself over or through the hedge, though that was the nearest way home: he took to his heels down the road, and in an incredibly short space of time burst into the surgery, astonishing Jan and the surgery boy.

"I say, Jan, though, haven't I had a fright!"

Jan, at the moment, was consulting the prescription-book. He raised his eyes, and looked over the counter. Master Cheese's face had turned white, and drops of moisture were pouring from it—in spite of his bravery.

"What have you been at?" asked Jan.

"I saw the thing they are talking about, Jan. It *is* Fred Massingbird's."

Jan grinned. That Master Cheese's fright was genuine, there could be no mistaking, and it amused Jan excessively.

"What had you been taking?" asked he, in his incredulity.

"I had taken nothing," retorted Master Cheese, who did not like ridicule. "I had not had the opportunity of taking anything—unless it was your medicine. Catch me tapping that! Look here, Jan. I was coming by Crow Corner, when I saw something standing back in the hedge. I thought it was some poaching fellow hiding there, and went up to dislodge him. Didn't I wish myself up in the skies? It was the face of Fred Massingbird."

"The face of your fancy," slightingly returned Jan.

"I swear it was, then! There! There's no mistaking *him*. The hedgehog on his cheek looked larger and blacker than ever."

Master Cheese did not fail to talk of this abroad. The surgery boy, Bob, who had listened with open ears, did not fail to talk of it either, and it spread throughout Deerham as additional testimony to that already accumulated. In a few days' time, commotion was at its height; nearly the only persons who remained in ignorance of the reported facts being the master and mistress of Verner's Pride, and their relatives on either side.

That some great wave of superstition was flowing through Deerham, Lionel well knew. In his ignorance, he attributed it to the rumour which had first been circulated, touching Rachel's ghost. He was an ear-witness to an angry colloquy at home. Some trifle indispensable to his wife's toilette was suddenly required from Deerham one evening, and Mademoiselle Benoite ordered that it should be sent for. But not one of the maids would go. The French woman insisted, and there ensued a stormy war. The girls, one and all, declared they would rather give up their service, than go abroad after nightfall.

When the fears and superstitions came palpably in Lionel's way, he made fun of it—as Jan might have done. Once or twice he felt half provoked; and asked the people, in a tone between jest and earnest, whether they were not ashamed of themselves. Little reply made they: not one of them but seemed to shrink from mentioning to Lionel Verner the name that the ghost had borne in life.

On nearly the last evening that it would be light during this moon, Mr. Bourne started from home to pay a visit to Mrs. Hook, the labourer's wife. The woman had been ailing for some time: partly from illness, partly from chagrin—for her daughter Alice was the talk of the village—and she had now become seriously ill. On

this day Mr. Bourne had accidentally met Jan: and, in conversing upon parish matters, he inquired after Mrs. Hook.

"Very much worse," was Jan's answer. "Unless a change takes place, she'll not last many days."

The clergyman was shocked: he had not deemed her in danger. And late in the evening, when his duties were over, he started to see her.

His most direct way from the Vicarage to Hook's cottage took him past the Willow Pond. *He* had no fear of ghosts, and therefore he chose it, in preference to going down Clay Lane, which was further round. The Willow Pool looked lonely enough as he passed it, its waters gleaming in the moonlight, its willows drooping. A little farther on, the clergyman's ears became alive to the sound of sobs, as from a person in distress. There was Alice Hook, seated on a bench underneath some elm-trees, sobbing enough to break her heart.

However the girl might have become the censure of the neighbourhood, it is a clergyman's office to console, rather than to condemn. And he could not help liking pretty Alice: she had been one of the most tractable pupils in his Sunday school. He addressed her as soothingly, as considerately, as though she were one of the chief ladies in his parish: harshness would not mend the matter now. Her heart opened to the kindness.

"I've broken mother's heart, and killed her!" cried she, with a wild burst of sobs. "But for me, she might have got well."

"She may get well still, Alice," replied the Vicar. "I am going to see her now. What are you doing here?"

"I am on my way, sir, to get fresh physic for her. Mr. Jan said this morning somebody was to go for it: but the rest have been out all day. As I came along, I got thinking of the time, sir, when I could go about by daylight with my head up, like the rest of them; and it overcame me."

She rose, dried her eyes with her shawl, and Mr. Bourne proceeded onwards. He had not gone far, when something came rushing past him from the opposite direction. It seemed more like a thing than a man, with its swift pace—and he recognized the face of Frederick Massingbird.

Mr. Bourne's pulses stood still, and then gave a bound onwards. Clergyman though he was, he could not, for his life, have helped the queer feeling which came over him. He had sharply rebuked the superstition in his parishioners; had been inclined to ridicule Matthew Frost; had cherished a firm and unalterable belief that some foolish wight was playing pranks with the public; but all these suppositions and convictions faded in that moment: and the clergyman felt that that which had rustled past was the veritable dead-and-gone Frederick Massingbird, in the spirit or in the flesh.

He shook off the feeling—or strove to do so. That it was Frederick Massingbird in the flesh he did not think for a moment: and that it could be Frederick Massingbird in the spirit, was opposed to every past belief of the clergyman's life. But he had never seen such a likeness: and though the similarity of features might be accidental, what of the black star upon the cheek?

He endeavoured to get rid of the feeling; he said to himself that some one, bearing a similar face, must be in the village; and he went on to his destination. Mrs. Hook was better; but she was left unattended, all of them being out somewhere or other. Jan came in while he was there, and the two gentlemen left together.

"She is considerably better, to-night," remarked Jan. "She'll get about now, if she does not fret too much over Alice."

"It is strange where Alice can have got to," remarked Mr. Bourne. Her prolonged absence, coupled with the low spirits the girl appeared to be in, rather weighed upon his mind. "I met her as I was coming here an hour ago," he continued. "She ought to have been home long before this."

"Perhaps she has encountered the ghost," said Jan, jokingly.

"I saw it to-night, Jan."

"Saw what?" asked Jan, looking at Mr. Bourne.

"The—the party that appears to be personating Frederick Massingbird."

"Nonsense!" uttered Jan.

"I did. And I never saw such a likeness in my life."

"Even to the porcupine," ridiculed Jan.

"Even to the porcupine," gravely replied Mr. Bourne. "Jan, I am not joking. Moreover, I do not consider it a subject for joking. If any one is playing a trick, it is an infamous thing, most disrespectful towards your brother and his wife. And if not——"

"If not—what?" asked Jan.

"In truth, I stopped because I can't continue. Frederick Massingbird's spirit it cannot be—unless all our previous disbelief in the appearance of spirits is to be upset—and it cannot be Frederick Massingbird in life. He died in Australia, and was buried there. I am puzzled, Jan."

Jan was not. Jan only laughed. He believed there must be something in the moonlight that deceived the people, and that Mr. Bourne had caught the infection from the rest.

"Should it prove to be a trick that any one is playing," resumed the clergyman, "I shall——"

"Halloa!" cried Jan. "What's this? Another ghost?"

They had almost stumbled over something lying on the ground. A woman, dressed in some light material. Jan stooped.

"It's Alice Hook!" he cried.

The spot was that at which Mr. Bourne had seen her sitting. The empty bottle for medicine in her hand told him that she had not gone upon her errand. She was cold and insensible.

"She has fainted," remarked Jan. "Lend a hand, will you, sir?"

Between them they raised her, and helped to convey her home. But she was evidently under the influence of excessive terror.

Her first movement, when she fully recovered her senses, was to clutch Jan on the one side, and Mr. Bourne on the other. "Is it gone?" she gasped.

"Is what gone, child?" asked Mr. Bourne.

"The ghost," she answered. "It came right up, sir, just after you left me. I would rather die than see it again."

She was shaking from head to foot. There was no doubt that her alarm was intense. To attempt to meet it with arguments would have been simply folly, and both gentlemen knew it. Mr. Bourne concluded that the sight, which had so astonished him, had also been seen by the girl.

"I sat down again after you went, sir," she resumed, her teeth chattering, "and it came right up again me, quite brushing my knees as it passed. At the first moment I thought it might be you coming back to say something to me, sir, and I looked up. It turned its face upon me, and I remember nothing after that."

"Whose face?" questioned Jan.

"The ghost's, sir. Mr. Fred Massingbird's."

"Bah!" said Jan. "Faces look alike in the moonlight."

"It was his face," answered the girl, from between her tremulous lips. "I saw its every feature, sir."

"Porcupine and all?" retorted Jan, ironically.

"Porkypine and all, sir. I'm not sure that I should have known it at first, but for the black mark."

What were they to do with the girl? Leave her there, and go? Jan, who was more skilled in ailments than Mr. Bourne, thought it possible that the fright had seriously injured her. He bade her go at once to bed, and again departed with the clergyman.

"What do you think now?" asked Mr. Bourne, as they moved along.

Jan looked at him. "*You* are not thinking, surely, that it is Fred Massingbird's ghost!"

"No. But I should advise Mr. Verner to place a watch, and have the affair cleared up—who it is, and what it is."

"Why Mr. Verner?"

"Because it is on his land that the disturbance is occurring. This girl has been seriously frightened."

"You may have cause to know that, before many hours are over," answered Jan.

"Why! you don't fear that she will be seriously ill?"

"Time will show," was all the answer given by Jan. "As to the ghost, I'll either believe in him, or disbelieve him, when I come across him. If he were a respectable ghost, he'd confine himself to the churchyard, and not walk in unorthodox places, to frighten folks."

They looked somewhat curiously at the seat near which Alice had fallen; looked at the Willow Pond, farther on. There was no trace of a ghost about then—at least as far as they could see—and they continued their way. In emerging upon the high-road, whom should they meet but old Mr. Bitterworth and Lionel, arm in arm. They had been to an evening meeting of the magistrates at Deerham, and were walking home together.

"We have been to Hook's," observed Jan. "The mother's better to-night: but I have had another patient there. The girl Alice has seen the ghost, or fancied that she saw it, and was literally terrified out of her senses."

"How is she going on?" asked Mr. Bitterworth.

"Physically, do you mean, sir?"

"No, I meant morally, Jan. If all accounts are true, the girl has been forgetting herself."

"Law!" said Jan. "Deerham has known that this many a month past. I'd try and stop it, if I were Lionel."

"Stop what?" asked Lionel.

"I'd build them better dwellings," composedly went on Jan. "They might be brought up in decency then."

"It's quite true that decency can't put its head into such dwellings as that of the Hooks'," observed the Vicar. "People have accused me of showing leniency to Alice Hook, since the scandal has been known; but I cannot be harsh with her when I think of the home the girl was reared in."

The words pricked Lionel. None could think worse of the homes than he did. He spoke crossly: we are all apt to do so, when vexed with ourselves. "Ghosts! They only affect fear, it is my belief. A little superstition, following on Rachel's peculiar death, may have been excusable at the time, considering the ignorance of the people: but why it should have been revived now, I cannot imagine."

Mr. Bitterworth and Jan had walked on. The Vicar touched Lionel on the arm, to prevent his immediately following them.

"Mr. Verner, I do not hold with the policy of keeping this matter from you," he said confidentially. "I cannot see the good of it in any way. It is not Rachel Frost's ghost that is said to be terrifying people."

"Whose then?" asked Lionel.

"Frederick Massingbird's."

Lionel paused, as if his ears deceived him.

"*Whose?*" he repeated.

"Frederick Massingbird's."

"How perfectly absurd!" he presently exclaimed.

"True," said Mr. Bourne. "So absurd that, were it not for a circumstance which has happened to-night, I scarcely think I should myself have repeated it to you. My conviction is, that some person, bearing an extraordinary resemblance to Frederick Massingbird, is walking about to terrify the neighbourhood."

"I should think there's not another face living that bears a resemblance to Fred Massingbird's," observed Lionel. "How have you heard this?"

"The first to tell me of it was old Matthew Frost. He saw him plainly, believing it to be Frederick Massingbird's spirit—although he had never believed in spirits before. Dan Duff holds to it that *he* saw it; and now Alice Hook: besides several others. I turned a deaf ear to all, Mr. Verner; but to-night I met one so like Frederick Massingbird that, were Massingbird not dead, I could have sworn it was himself. It was wondrously like him, even to the mark on the cheek."

"I never heard such a tale!" uttered Lionel.

"That is precisely what I said—until to-night. I assure you the resemblance is so great, that if we have all female Deerham in fits, I shall not wonder. It strikes me—it is the only solution I can come to—that some one is personating Frederick Massingbird for the purpose of playing a mischievous joke—though how they get up the resemblance is another thing. Let me advise you to see into it, Mr. Verner."

Mr. Bitterworth and Jan were turning round in front, waiting; and the Vicar hastened on, leaving Lionel glued to the spot where he stood.

CHAPTER L.

MRS. DUFF'S BILL.

PEAL! peal! peal! came the sound of the night-bell at Jan's window as he lay in bed. For Jan had caused the night-bell to be hung there since he had become general factotum. "Where's the good of waking up the house?" remarked Jan: and he made the alteration.

Jan got up with the first sound, and put his head out at the

window. Upon which, Hook—for he was the applicant—advanced. Jan's window being, as you may remember, nearly on a level with the ground, was favourable to holding a face-to-face colloquy with night visitors.

"She's mortal bad, sir," was Hook's salutation.

"Who is?" asked Jan. "Alice, or the missis?"

"Not the missis, sir. The other. But I shouldn't have liked to trouble you, if you hadn't ordered me."

"I won't be two minutes," said Jan.

It seemed to Hook that Jan was only one minute, so quickly did he come out. A belief was popular in Deerham that Mr. Jan slept with his clothes on. No sooner would a night summons be delivered than Jan was out with the messenger, ready to start. Before he had closed the surgery door, through which he had to pass, there came another peal, and a woman ran up to him. Jan recognized her for the cook of a wealthy lady in the Belvidere Road, a Mrs. Ellis.

"Law, sir! what a mercy that you are up and ready!" exclaimed she. "My mistress is attacked again."

"Well, you know what to do," returned Jan. "You don't want me."

"But she wants you, sir. I have orders not to go back without you."

"I suppose she has been eating cucumber again?" remarked Jan.

"Only a very little, sir. About half a small one, for her supper. And now the spasms are dreadful."

"Of course they are," replied Jan. "She knows how cucumber serves her. Well, I can't come. I'll send Mr. Cheese, if you like. But he can do no more good than you can. Give her the drops and get hot flannels; that's all."

"You are going out, sir!" cried the woman, in tones that sounded as if she would like to be impertinent. "*You* have come for him, I suppose?" turning sharply upon Hook.

"Yes," humbly replied Hook. "Poor Ally——"

The woman exclaimed, "You'd attend that miserable castaway before you'd attend my mistress!" she cried to Jan. "Who's Alice Hook, by the side of folks of standing?"

"If she wants attendance, she must have it," was the composed return of Jan. "She has a body and soul to be saved, as other folks have. She is is danger; your mistress is not."

"Danger! What has that to do with it?" angrily answered the woman. "You'll never get paid there, sir."

"I don't expect it," returned Jan. "If you'd like Cheese, that's his window," pointing to one in the house. "Throw a handful of gravel up, and tell him I said he was to attend."

Jan walked off with Hook. He heard a crash of gravel behind him; so concluded the cook was flinging at Mr. Cheese's window in a temper. As she certainly was: giving Mr. Jan hard words in the process. Just as Lady Verner had never been able to inculcate suavity upon Jan, so Dr. West had found it hopeless to endeavour to make Jan understand that, in medical care, the rich should be considered before the poor. Take, for example, that *bête noire* of Deerham just now, Alice Hook, and put her by the side of a duchess: Jan would have gone to the one who had most need of him, without reference as to which of the two it might be. Evidently there was little hope of Jan.

Jan, with his long legs, outstripped the stooping, hard-worked labouring man. In at the door and up the stairs went he, into the sleeping-room.

Did you ever pay a visit to a room of this social grade? If not, you will deem the introduction of this one highly coloured. Had Jan been a head and shoulders shorter he might have been able to stand up in the lean-to attic, without touching the roof. On a low bedstead, on a flock mattress, lay the mother and two children, about eight and ten. How they made room for Hook also, was a puzzle. Opposite, on a straw mattress, slept three sons, grown up, or nearly so; between these beds was another straw mattress where lay Alice and her sister, a year younger: no curtains, no screens, no anything. All were asleep, with the exception of the mother and Alice: the former could not rise from her bed; Alice appeared too ill to rise from hers. Jan stooped and entered.

A few minutes, and he set himself to arouse the sleepers. They might make themselves comfortable in the kitchen, he told them, for the rest of the night: he wanted room in the place to turn round in, and they must leave it. And so he bundled them out. Jan was not given to ceremony. But it is not a pleasant room to linger in, so we will leave Jan to it.

It was pleasanter at Lady Verner's. Enough air, and light, and accommodation might be found there. But even in that desirable residence it was not all *couleur-de-rose*. Vexations intrude into the most luxurious home, whatever may be the amount of room, or the style of its architecture: and they were just now agitating Deerham Court.

On the morning which rose on the above night—as lovely a morning as ever September gave us—Lady Verner and Lucy Tempest received each a letter from India. Both were from Colonel Tempest. The contents of Lady Verner's annoyed her, and the contents of Lucy's annoyed *her*.

It appeared that some considerable time back, nearly, if not quite, twelve months, Lucy had privately written to Colonel Tem-

pest, urgently requesting to be allowed to go out to join him. She gave no reason or motive for the request, but urged it strongly. That letter, in consequence of the moving about of Colonel Tempest, had only just reached him: and now had arrived its answer. He told Lucy that he should very shortly be returning to Europe: therefore it was useless for her to think of going out to him.

So far, so good. However Lucy might have been vexed or disappointed at the reply—and she was both; still more at the delay which had taken place—there the matter would have ended. But Colonel Tempest, having no idea that Lady Verner was a stranger to this request; inferring, on the contrary, that she was a party to it, and must therefore be growing tired of her charge, had also written to her an elaborate apology for leaving Lucy so long upon her hands, and for being unable to comply with her wish to be relieved of her. This enlightened Lady Verner as to what Lucy had done.

She was very angry. She was more than angry; she was mortified. And she questioned Lucy a great deal more closely than that young lady liked, as to what her motive could have been, and why she was tired of Deerham Court.

Lucy, all too conscious of the motive by which she had been really actuated, stood before her as a culprit. "I am not tired of Deerham Court, Lady Verner. But I wished to be with papa."

"Which is equivalent to saying that you wished to be away from me," retorted my lady.

Lionel entered, and interrupted the discussion. Lady Verner put him in possession of the facts. That for some cause which Lucy refused to explain, she wanted to leave Deerham Court; had been writing, twelve months ago, to Colonel Tempest, to be allowed to join him in India; and the refusal had arrived only that morning. Lady Verner would like the motive for her request explained: but Lucy was obstinate, and would not explain it.

Lionel turned his eyes on Lucy. If she had stood self-consciously before Lady Verner, she was doubly self-conscious now. Her eyelashes drooped, her cheeks turned crimson.

"She says she has no fault to find with me, no fault to find with the arrangements of my house," pursued Lady Verner. "Then I want to know what else should drive her away from Deerham. Look at her, Lionel! That is how she stands: unable to give me any answer."

Lady Verner might equally well have said, "Look at Lionel." *He* stood self-conscious also. Too well he knew the motive—absence from him—which had actuated Lucy. From him, who had played her false; away, anywhere, from witnessing his daily happiness and that of his wife. He read it all, and Lucy saw that he did so.

"It were no such strange wish, surely, to be where my dear papa is!" she exclaimed.

"No," murmured Lionel, "no such strange wish. I wish *I* could go out to India, and free the neighbourhood of my presence!"

A curious wish! Lady Verner did not understand it. Lionel gave her no opportunity of inquiring into its meaning, for he turned to leave the room and the house. She rose and laid her hand upon his arm to detain him.

"I have an engagement," pleaded Lionel.

"A moment yet. Lionel, what *is* this nonsense that is disturbing the equanimity of Deerham? About a ghost!"

"Ah, what indeed?" returned Lionel, carelessly, as if he would make light of it. "You know what Deerham is, mother. Some think Dan Duff saw his own shadow; some, a white cow in the pound. Either is sufficient marvel for Deerham."

"So vulgar a notion!" reiterated Lady Verner, resuming her seat, and taking her essence bottle into her delicately gloved hand. "I wonder you don't stop it, Lionel."

"I!" cried Lionel, opening his eyes in surprise. "How am I to stop it?"

"You are lord of Deerham. It is vulgar, I say, to have such a report afloat on your estate."

Lionel smiled. "I don't know how you are to put away vulgarity from star-gazers and villagers. Or ghosts, either—if they once get ghosts in their heads."

He finally left the Court, and turned towards home. His mother's words about the ghost had brought the subject to his mind. If, indeed, it had required such reminder; but the whispered communication of the Vicar the previous night had scarcely been out of his thoughts since then. It troubled him. In spite of himself, of his sense and reason, there was an undercurrent of uneasiness at work within him. Why should there be? Lionel could not have explained had he been required to do so. That Frederick Massingbird was dead and buried, there could be no shadow of doubt: and ghosts had no place in the creed of Lionel Verner. All true: but the uneasiness was there, and he could not ignore it.

In the last few days, the old feeling touching Lucy had been revived with unpleasant force. Since that night which she had spent at his house, when they saw, or fancied they saw, a man hiding himself under the tree, he had thought of her more than was agreeable; more than was right, he would have said, but that he saw not how to avoid it. The little episode of this morning at his mother's house had served to open his eyes most completely; to show him how intense was his love for Lucy Tempest. It must

be confessed that his wife did little towards striving to retain his affection.

He went along, thinking of these things: he would have put them from him; but he could not. The more he tried, the more unpleasantly vivid they became. "Tush!" said Lionel. "I must be growing nervous! I'll ask Jan to give me a draught."

He was passing Dr. West's as he spoke, and turned into the surgery. Sitting on a large stone jar was Master Cheese, his attitude disconsolate, his expression rebellious.

"Is Mr. Jan at home?" asked Lionel.

"No, he's not at home, sir," replied Master Cheese, as if the fact were some personal grievance of his own. "Here's all the patients, all the making-up of the physic left in my charge, and I'd like to know how I am to do it? I can't go out to fifty folks at a time."

"And so you expedite the matter by not going to one of them! Where is Mr. Jan?"

"He was fetched out in the night to that beautiful Alice Hook," grumbled Master Cheese. "It's a shame, sir, folks are saying, for him to give his time to *her*. I had to leave my warm bed and march out to that fanciful Mother Ellis, through it, who's always getting spasms. And I had about forty poor here this morning, and couldn't get a bit of comfortable breakfast for them. Miss Deb never kept my bacon warm, or anything; and somebody had eaten the meat out of the veal pie when I got back. Jan *will* have those horrid poor here twice a week, and if I speak about it, he tells me to hold my tongue."

"But is Mr. Jan not back yet from Hook's?"

"No, sir, he's not," was the resentful answer. "He has never come back at all since he went, and that was at four o'clock this morning. If he had gone to cut off all the arms and legs in Hook's house, he couldn't have been longer! And I wish him joy of it! He'll get no breakfast. They have nothing for themselves but bread and water."

Lionel left his draught an open question, and departed. As he turned into the principal street again, he saw Master Dan Duff at the door of his mother's shop. An impulse prompted Lionel to question the boy of what he saw that unlucky night; or believed he saw. He crossed over; but Master Dan retreated within the shop. Lionel followed him.

"Well, Dan! Have you overcome the fright of the cow yet?"

"'Twasn't a cow, please sir," replied Dan, timidly. "'Twas a ghost."

"Whose ghost?" returned Lionel.

Dan hesitated. He stood first on one leg, then on the other.

"Please, sir, 'twasn't Rachel's," said he, presently.

"Whose, then?" repeated Lionel.

"Please, sir, mother said I wasn't to tell you. Roy said if I told it to anybody, I should be took and hanged."

"But I say that you are to tell me," said Lionel. And his pleasant tone, combined, perhaps, with the fact that he was Mr. Verner, effected more with Dan Duff than his mother's sharp tones or Roy's threats.

"Please, sir," glancing round to make sure that his mother was not within hearing, "'twas Mr. Fred Massingbird's. They can't talk me out on't, sir. I see the porkypine as plain as I see him. He was——"

Dan brought his information to a standstill. Bustling downstairs was that revered mother. She came in, curtseying fifty times to Lionel. "What could she have the honour of serving him with?" He was leaning over the counter, and she concluded he had come to patronize the shop.

Lionel laughed. "I am a profitless customer, I believe, Mrs. Duff. I was only talking to Dan."

Dan sidled off to the street-door. Once there, he took to his heels, out of harm's way. Mr. Verner might get telling his mother more particulars, and it was as well to be at a safe distance.

Lionel, however, had no intention of betraying trust. He stood chatting a few minutes with Mrs. Duff. He and Mrs. Duff had been great friends when he was an Eton boy: many a time had he ransacked her shop over for flies and gut and other fishing tackle, a supply of which Mrs. Duff professed to keep. She listened to him with a somewhat preoccupied manner: in point of fact, she was debating a question with herself.

"Sir," said she, rubbing her hands nervously one over the other, "I should like to make bold to ask a favour of you. But I don't know how it might be took. I'm fearful it might be took as a cause of offence."

"Not by me. What is it?"

"It is a delicate thing, sir, to have to ask about," resumed she. "And I shouldn't venture, sir, to speak to *you*, but that I'm so put to it, and that I've got it in my head it's through the fault of the servants."

She spoke with evident reluctance. Lionel, he scarcely knew why, leaped to the conclusion that she was about to say something concerning the subject then agitating Deerham—the ghost of Frederick Massingbird. Unconsciously, his pleasant manner changed to one of constraint.

"Say what you have to say, Mrs. Duff."

"Well, sir—but I'm sure I beg a hundred thousand pardons for

mentioning it—it's about the bill," she answered, lowering her voice. "If I could be paid, sir, it would be the greatest help to me. I hardly know how to keep on."

No revelation touching the ghost could have given Lionel the surprise imparted by these ambiguous words. But his constraint was gone.

"I do not understand you, Mrs. Duff. What bill?

"The bill that's owing to me, sir, from Verner's Pride. It's a large sum for me, sir,—thirty-two pound odd. I have to keep up my payments for my goods, sir, whether or not, or I should be a bankrupt to-morrow. Things are hard upon me just now, sir: though I don't want everybody to know it. There's that big son of mine, Dick, out o' work. If I could have the bill, or only part of it, it would be like a God-send."

"Who owes you the bill?" asked Lionel.

"It's your good lady, sir, Mrs. Verner."

"*Who?*" echoed Lionel, sharply.

"Mrs. Verner, sir."

Lionel stood gazing at the woman. He could not take in the information, but believed there must be some mistake.

"It was for things supplied between the time Mrs. Verner came home after your marriage, sir, and when she went to London in the spring. The French madmizel, sir, came down and ordered some of 'em; and Mrs. Verner herself, sir, ordered others."

Lionel looked round the shop. He did not disbelieve the woman's words, but he was lost in astonishment. Perhaps a doubt of the Frenchwoman crossed his mind.

"There's nothing here that Mrs. Verner would wear!" he exclaimed.

"There's many odds and ends of things here, sir, as is useful to a lady's toilette—and you'd be surprised, sir, to find how such things mount up when they're had continual. But the chief part o' the bill, sir, is for two silk gownds as was had of our traveller. Mrs. Verner happened to be here when he called in one day last winter, and she saw his patterns, and chose two dresses, and said she'd buy 'em of me if I ordered them. Which in course I did, sir, and paid for 'em, and sent 'em home. I saw her wear them both, sir, after they were made up, and very nice they looked."

Lionel had heard quite enough. "Where is the bill?" he inquired.

"It has been sent in, sir, long ago. When I found Mrs. Verner didn't pay it before she went away, I made bold to write and ask her. Miss West gave me the address in London, and said she wished she could pay me herself. I didn't get an answer, sir, and I made bold to write again, and I never got one then. Twice I

have been up to Verner's Pride, sir, since you come home this time, but I can't get to see Mrs. Verner. That French madmizel's one o' the best I ever saw at putting folks off. Sir, it goes against the grain to trouble you ; and if I could have got to see Mrs. Verner, I never would have said a word. Perhaps if you'd be so good as to tell her, sir, how hard I'm put to it, she'd send me a little."

"I am sure she will," said Lionel. "You shall have your money to-day, Mrs. Duff."

He turned out of the shop, the scarlet of emotion on his cheek. Thirty-two pounds owing to poor Mrs. Duff? Was it *thoughtlessness* on Sibylla's part? He strove to beat down the conviction that it was a less excusable error.

But the Verner pride had been wounded to its very core.

CHAPTER LI.

SELF-WILL.

GATHERED before a target on the lawn, in their archery costume gleaming with green and gold, was a fair group, shooting arrows into the air. Far more went into the ground than struck the target. They were the visitors of Verner's Pride: and Sibylla, their hostess, was the gayest, the merriest, the fairest amongst them.

Lionel came on the terrace, descended the steps, and crossed the lawn to join them: as courtly, as apparently gay, as if that bill of Mrs. Duff's was not making havoc of his heartstrings. They all surrounded him: it was not often they had so attractive a host to surround: and attractive men are, and always will be, welcome to women. A few minutes, a quarter-of-an-hour given to them, an unruffled smoothness on his brow, a smile upon his lips, and then he contrived to draw his wife aside.

"Oh, Lionel, I forgot to tell you," she exclaimed. "Poynton has been here. He knows of the most charming pair of grey ponies, he says. And they can be ours if secured at once."

"I don't want grey ponies," replied Lionel.

"But I do," cried Sibylla. "You say I am too timid to drive. It is all nonsense; I should soon get over the timidity. I *will* learn to drive, Lionel. Mrs. Jocelyn, come here," she called out.

Mrs. Jocelyn, a young and pretty woman, almost as pretty as Sibylla, answered the summons.

"Tell Mr. Verner what Poynton said about the ponies."

"Oh, you must not miss the opportunity," cried Mrs. Jocelyn to Lionel. "They are perfectly beautiful, the man said. Very dear, of course; but you know nobody looks at money when buy-

ing horses for a lady. Mrs. Verner must have them. You might secure them to-day."

"I have no room in my stables for more horses," said Lionel, smiling at Mrs. Jocelyn's eagerness.

"Yes you have, Lionel," interposed his wife. "Or, if not, room must be made. I have ordered the ponies to be brought."

"I shall send them back again," said Lionel, laughing.

"Don't you wish your wife to take to driving, Mr. Verner? Don't you like to see a lady driving? Some men do not."

"I think there is no necessity for a lady to drive, while she has a husband at her side to drive for her," was the reply of Lionel.

"Well—if I had such a husband as you to drive me, I don't know but I might subscribe to that doctrine," candidly avowed Mrs. Jocelyn. "*I* would not miss these ponies, were I Mrs. Verner. You can drive them, you know. They are calling me. It is my turn, I suppose."

She went back to the shooting. Sibylla was following her, but Lionel caught her hand and drew her into a covered walk. Placing her hand within his arm, he began to pace it. "Sibylla, I have been terribly vexed this morning."

"Oh, now Lionel, don't begin about 'vexing,'" interrupted Sibylla, in the light, foolish, affected manner, which had grown worse of late, more intolerable to Lionel. "I have ordered the ponies. Poynton will send them in; and if there's really not room in the stables, you must see about it, and give orders that room shall be made."

"I cannot buy the ponies," he firmly said. "My dear, I have given in to your every wish, to your most trifling whim; but, as I told you a few days ago, these ever-recurring expenses I cannot stand. Sibylla"—and his voice grew hoarse—"do you know that I am becoming embarrassed?"

"I don't care if you are," pouted Sibylla. "I must have the ponies."

His heart ached. Was this the loving wife—the intelligent companion for whom he had once yearned?—the friend who should be as his own soul? He had married the Sibylla of his imagination; and he awoke to find Sibylla—what she was. The disappointment was heavy upon him at all times; but there were moments when he could have cried aloud at its bitterness.

"Sibylla, you know the state in which some of my tenants live; the miserable dwellings they are forced to inhabit. I must change this state of things. I believe it to be a duty for which I am accountable to God. How am I to set about it if you ruin me?"

Sibylla put her fingers to her ears. "I can't stand to listen when you preach, Lionel. It is as bad as a sermon."

It was ever thus. He could not attempt to reason with her. Anything like sensible conversation she could not or would not hold with him. Lionel, considerate to her as he ever was, felt provoked.

"Do you know that this unfortunate affair of Alice Hook's is laid remotely upon me?" he said, a sternness, which he could not help, in his tone. "People are saying that if I gave them decent dwellings, decent conduct would ensue. It is so. God knows that I feel its truth more keenly than those who reproach me."

"The dwellings are good enough for the poor."

"Sibylla? You cannot think it. The laws of God and man alike demand a change. Child," he continued in softer tones, as he took her hand in his, "let us bring the case home to ourselves. Suppose that you and I had to sleep in a room a few feet square, no chimney, no air, and that others tenanted it with us? Girls and boys growing up: nay, grown up, some of them; men and women as we are, Sibylla; beds huddled together, no space between them; sickness, fever——"

"I am only closing my ears," interrupted Sibylla. "You pretend to be so careful of me—you would not even let me go to that masked ball in Paris—and yet you bring these horrid pictures before me! I think you ought to be ashamed of it, Lionel!"

"If the picture is revolting, what must be the reality?" was his rejoinder. "*They* have to endure it."

"They are used to it," retorted Sibylla. "They are brought up to nothing better."

"Just so. And therefore their perceptions of right and wrong are deadened. The wonder is, not that Alice Hook has lost herself, but that——"

"I don't want to hear about Alice Hook," interrupted Sibylla. "She is not very good to talk about."

"I have been openly told, Sibylla, that the reproach should lie at my door."

"I believe it is not the first reproach of the kind that has been cast upon you," answered Sibylla, with cutting sarcasm.

He did not know what she meant, or in what sense to take the remark; but his mind was too preoccupied to linger on it. "With these things staring me in the face, how can I find money for superfluous vanities? The time has come when I am compelled to make a stand against it. I will, I must, have decent dwellings on my estate, and I shall set about the work without a day's loss of time."

"I have bought the ponies," coolly interrupted Sibylla.

"Then, my dear, you must forgive me if I countermand the purchase. I am resolute, Sibylla," he continued firmly. "For the

first time since our marriage, I must deny your wish. 'I cannot let you bring me to ruin, because you also would be involved in it. What is it that you owe Mrs. Duff?"

Sibylla's colour heightened. "It is no business of yours, Lionel, what I owe her. There may be some trifle or other down in her book. It will be time enough for you to concern yourself with my petty debts when you are asked to pay them."

"Then that time is the present one, with regard to Mrs. Duff. She applied to me for the money this morning. At least, she asked if I would speak to you—which is the same thing. She says you owe her thirty-two pounds. Sibylla, I had far rather have been stabbed than have heard it."

"A fearful sum, truly, to be doled out of your coffers!" cried Sibylla, sarcastically. "You'll never recover it, I should think!"

"Not that, not that," was the reply of Lionel, his tone full of pain. "Sibylla! have you *no* sense of the fitness of things? Is it seemly for the mistress of Verner's Pride to keep a poor woman, as Mrs. Duff is, out of her money; a humble shopkeeper who has to pay her way as she goes on?"

"I wish Fred had lived! He would never have taken me to task as you do."

"I wish he had!" was the retort in Lionel's heart: but he bit his lips and was silent: exchanging the words, after a few minutes' pause, for others.

"You would have found Frederick Massingbird a less indulgent husband to you than I have been," he firmly said. "But these remarks are profitless, and will add neither to your comfort nor mine. Sibylla, I shall send, in your name, to pay this bill of Mrs. Duff's."

"And if you don't let me have the horses, and all other things I want, I'll go where I can have them."

What did she mean? Lionel's cheek turned white with the taunt the words might be supposed to imply. He held her hands in his, pressing them nervously.

"You shall not force me to quarrel with you, Sibylla," he continued with emotion. "I have almost registered a vow that no offensive word or conduct on your part shall make me forget myself for a moment; or render me other than an ever-considerate husband. It may be that our marriage was a mistake for both of us; but we shall do well to make the best of it. It is the only course remaining to us."

He spoke in strangely earnest tones: tones of deep agitation. Sibylla was aroused. She had believed that Lionel blindly loved her. Otherwise she might have been more careful to retain his love: it cannot be known.

"How do you mean that our marriage was a mistake for both of us?" she hastily cried.

"You do your best to remind me continually that it must be so,' was his reply.

"Psha!" returned Sibylla. And Lionel, without another word, left her and walked away. In these moments, above all others, would the image of Lucy Tempest rise up before him. Beat it down as he would, it was ever present with him. A mistake in his marriage! Ay; none save Lionel knew how fatal a one.

He passed on to the terrace, avoiding the lawn, traversed it, and went out by the large gates. Thence he made his way to Poynton's, and found that Sibylla had really given the order for the ponies.

"Which I have come to countermand," said Lionel, calling up a light smile to his face. "I cannot have my wife's neck risked by her attempting to drive spirited ponies, Poynton. She knows nothing of driving, is constitutionally timid, and—in short, I do not wish the order executed."

"Very well, sir," was the man's reply. "There's no harm done. Mrs. Verner said she should like the ponies, but I have not done anything in it."

Jan was coming up the road from Deerham with long strides, as Lionel turned out of Poynton's yard.

"One would think you were walking for a wager, Jan!"

"Ay," said Jan. "This is my first round to-day. Bitterworths have sent for me in desperate haste. Folks always get ill at the wrong time."

"Why don't you ride?" asked Lionel, turning with Jan, and stepping out at the same pace.

"There was no time to get the horse ready. I can walk almost as fast. I have had no breakfast yet."

"No breakfast!" echoed Lionel.

"I dived into the kitchen and took a piece of bread out of the basket. Half my patients must do without me to-day. I have only just got away from Hook's."

"How is the girl?"

"In great danger," replied Jan.

"She is ill, then?"

"So ill that I don't think she'll last the day out. The child's dead. I must cut across the fields back again there, after I have seen what's amiss at Bitterworth's."

The words touching Alice Hook caused quite a shock to Lionel. "It will be a sad thing, Jan, if she should die!"

"I don't think I can save her. This comes of the ghost. I wonder how many more folk will get frightened to death."

Lionel paused. "Was it really that alone that frightened the

girl, and caused her illness? How very absurd the thing sounds! And yet serious."

"I can't make it out," remarked Jan. "Here's Bourne, now, says he saw it. There's only one solution to the riddle that I can come to."

"What's that?" asked Lionel.

"Well," said Jan, "it's not a pleasant one."

"You can tell it me, Jan, pleasant or unpleasant."

"Not pleasant for you, I mean, Lionel. I'll tell you if you like."

Lionel looked at him. "Speak, Jan!"

"I think it must be Fred Massingbird himself."

The answer appeared to take Lionel by surprise. Possibly he had not admitted the doubt.

"Fred Massingbird himself! I don't understand you, Jan."

"Fred himself, in life," repeated Jan. "I fancy it will turn out that he did not die in Australia. He may have been very ill perhaps, and they fancied him dead: and now he is well again, and has come over."

Every vestige of colour forsook Lionel's face. "Jan!" he uttered, partly in terror, partly in anger. "Jan!" he repeated from between his bloodless lips. "Have you thought of the position in which your hint would place my wife?—the reflection it would cast upon her? How dare you?"

"You told me to speak," was Jan's composed answer. "I said you would not like it. Speaking of it or keeping silence, won't make it any the better, Lionel."

"What could possess you to think of such a thing?"

"There's nothing else I can think of. *Is* there such a thing as a ghost? Is that probable?"

"Nonsense! No," said Lionel.

"Then what can it be, unless it's Fred himself? Lionel, were I you, I would look the matter full in the face. It is Fred Massingbird, or it is not. If not, the sooner the mystery is cleared up the better, and the fellow brought to book and punished. It's not to be submitted to that he is to stride about for his own pastime, terrifying people to death. Is Alice Hook's life nothing? Were Dan Duff's senses nothing?—and, upon my word, I once thought there was good-bye to them."

Lionel did not answer. Jan continued.

"If it is Fred himself, the fact can't be long concealed. He'll be sure to make himself known. Why he should not do so at once, I can't imagine. Unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Lionel.

"Well, you are so touchy on all points relating to Sibylla, that one hesitates to speak," continued Jan. "I was going to say,

unless he fears the shock to Sibylla; and would prepare her for it by degrees."

"Jan," gasped Lionel, "it would kill her."

"No it wouldn't," dissented Jan. "She's not one to be killed by emotion of any sort. Or much stirred by it, as I believe, if you care for my opinion. It would not be pleasant for you or for her, but she wouldn't die of it."

Lionel wiped the moisture from his face. From the moment Jan had first spoken, a conviction had arisen within him that the suggestion would turn out to be only too true—that the ghost, in point of fact, was Frederick Massingbird in life.

"This is awful!" he murmured. "I would sacrifice my own life to save Sibylla from pain."

"Where would be the good of that?" asked practical Jan. "If it is Fred Massingbird in the flesh, she's his wife and not yours: your sacrificing yourself—as you call it, Lionel—would not make her any the less or the more so. I am abroad a good deal at night, especially now when there's so much sickness about, and I shall perhaps come across the fellow. Won't I pin him if I get the chance."

"Jan," said Lionel, holding his brother's arm to detain him as he was speeding away, for they had reached the gates of Verner's Pride, "be cautious that not a breath of this suspicion escapes you. For my poor wife's sake."

"No fear," answered Jan. "If it gets about, it won't be through me, mind. I am going to believe in the ghost henceforth, you understand. Except to you and Bourne."

"If it gets about," mechanically answered Lionel, repeating the words which most impressed him. "You think it will get about?"

"Think! It's safe to," answered Jan. "Had old Frost and Dan Duff and Cheese not been great gulls, they'd have taken it for Fred himself; not his ghost. Bourne suspects already. From a hint he dropped me just now at Hook's I find he takes the same view of the case that I do."

"Since when have you suspected this, Jan?"

"Not many hours. Don't keep me, Lionel. Bitterworth may be dying, for aught I know, and so may Alice Hook."

Jan went on like a steam-engine. Lionel remained, standing at his entrance-gates, more like a prostrate being than a living man.

Thought after thought crowded upon him. If it was really Frederick Massingbird in life, how was it that he had not made his appearance before? Where had he been all this time? Considerably more than two years had elapsed since the supposed death. To the best of Lionel's recollection, Sibylla had said Captain Cannonby *buried* her husband: but it was a point into

which Lionel had never minutely inquired. Allowing that Jan's suggestion was correct—that he did not die—where had he been since? What had prevented him from joining or seeking his wife? What prevented him doing so now? For what motive could he be in concealment in the neighbourhood, prowling about at night? Why did he not appear openly? Oh, it could not—it could not be Frederick Massingbird!

Which way should he bend his steps! Indoors, or away? Not indoors! He could scarcely *bear* to see his wife, with this dreadful uncertainty upon him. Restless, anxious, perplexed, miserable, Lionel Verner turned towards Deerham.

There are some natures upon whom a secret, awful as this, tells with appalling force, rendering it almost impossible to keep silence. To impart it to some friend, to speak of it, appears as a matter of dire necessity. It was so in this instance with Lionel Verner.

He was on his way to the Vicarage. Jan had mentioned that Mr. Bourne shared the knowledge—if knowledge it could be called: and he was one in whom might be placed entire trust.

He walked onwards, as one in a fevered dream, nodding mechanically in answer to salutations; answering he knew not what, if words were spoken to him. The Vicarage joined the churchyard, and the Vicar was standing in the latter as Lionel came up, watching two men digging a grave. He crossed over the mounds to shake hands with Lionel.

Lionel drew him into the Vicarage garden, amidst the trees. It was sheltered there; the outer world shut out from eye and ear.

"I cannot beat about the bush; I cannot dissemble," began Lionel, in deep agitation. "Tell me your true opinion of this business, for the love of Heaven! I have come down to ask it of you."

The Vicar paused. "My dear friend, I feel almost afraid to give it you."

"I have been speaking to Jan. He thinks it may be Frederick Massingbird—not dead, but living."

"I fear it is so," answered the clergyman. "Within the last half-hour I have fully believed that it is so."

Lionel leaned his back against a tree, his arms folded. Tolerably calm outwardly: but he could not get the healthy hue back to his face. "Why within the last half-hour more than before?" he asked. "Has anything fresh happened?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bourne. "I went down to Hook's: the girl's not expected to live through the day—but that you may have heard from Jan. In coming away, your gamekeeper met me. He stopped, and began asking my advice in a mysterious manner—whether, if a secret affecting his master had come to his knowledge, he ought,

or ought not, to impart it to his master. I felt sure what the man was driving at—it could be no other thing than this ghost affair—and gave him a hint to speak out to me in confidence. He did so."

"Well?" rejoined Lionel.

"He said," continued Mr. Bourne, lowering his voice, "that he passed a man last night who, he was perfectly certain, was Frederick Massingbird. Not Frederick Massingbird's ghost, as foolish people were fancying, Broom added, but Massingbird himself. He was in doubt whether or not it was his duty to acquaint Mr. Verner: and so he asked me. I bade him not acquaint you," continued the Vicar, "but to bury the suspicion within his own breast, breathing a word to none."

Evidence upon evidence! Every moment brought less loophole of escape for Lionel. "How can it be?" he gasped. "If he is not dead, where can he have been all this time?"

"I conclude it will turn out to be one of those every-day occurrences that have little marvel in them at all. My thoughts were busy upon it, while standing over yonder grave. I suppose he must have been to the Diggings. Possibly was laid up there from illness, and letters may have miscarried."

"You feel little doubt about the fact itself—that it is Frederick Massingbird?"

"I feel none. It is certainly he. Won't you come in and sit down?"

"No, no," said Lionel. And, drawing his hand from the Vicar's, he went forth again, he, and his load of care. Frederick Massingbird alive!

CHAPTER LII.

THE THUNDER-STORM.

THE fine September morning had turned to a rainy afternoon. A heavy mist hung upon the trees, the hedges, the ground; something akin to the mist which had fallen upon Lionel Verner's spirit. The day had grown more like November: the clouds were leaden, rain fell; even the little birds sought the shelter of their nests.

One, there was, who walked in it, his head uncovered, his brow bared. Not a bird, but a man. He was in the height of his fever-dream. It is not an inapt description of his state of mind. His veins coursed on as with fever; his thoughts bore all the vague uncertainty of a dream. Little heeded he that the weather had become chilly, or that the waters fell upon him!

What must be his course? What ought it to be? The more

he dwelt on the revelation of that day, the deeper grew his conviction that Frederick Massingbird was alive, breathing the very air that he breathed. What ought to be his course? If this were so, his wife was—not his wife.

It was obvious that his immediate course ought to be to solve the doubt: to set it at rest. But how? It could only be done by unearthing Frederick Massingbird; or he who bore so strange a resemblance to him. And where was he to be looked for? To track a "ghost" is not an easy matter; and Lionel had no clue wherewith to find the track of this one. If staying in the village, he must be concealed in some house; lying *perdu* by day. It was strange that it should be so; that he should not openly show himself.

There was another way by which perhaps the doubt might be solved—as it suddenly occurred to Lionel. And that was through Captain Cannonby. If this gentleman really was with Frederick Massingbird when he died, and saw him buried, it was evident that it could not be Frederick come back to life again. In that case, who or what it might be, Lionel did not stay to speculate: his business lay in ascertaining, by the most direct means in his power, whether it was, or was not, Frederick Massingbird. How was it possible to do this: how could it be possible to set the question at rest?

By a very simple process, it may be answered—waiting for time and chance. Ay, but do you know what waiting involves, in a case like this? Think of the state of mind that Lionel Verner must live under, during the suspense!

He no longer doubted that the man who had been under the tree on the lawn a few nights before, watching his window, was Frederick Massingbird. And yet, it was scarcely credible. Where now was Lionel to look for him? He could not, for Sibylla's sake, make inquiries in the village secretly or openly: he could not go to the inhabitants and ask them if they had seen Frederick Massingbird. For *her* sake he could not so much as breathe the name, in connection with his being alive.

Given that it was Frederick Massingbird, what could possibly prevent his making himself known? As he dwelt upon this problem, the idea taken up by Lucy Tempest—that the man under the tree was watching an opportunity to injure him—came into his mind. *That*, surely, could not be the solution! If he had taken Frederick Massingbird's wife to be his own wife, he had done it in all innocence. Lionel spurned the notion as preposterous. Nevertheless, a remembrance crossed him of the days when the popular belief at Verner's Pride had been, that the younger of the Massingbirds was of a remarkably secretive and also of a revengeful nature.

But all that he barely glanced at: the terrible fear touching Sibylla absorbed him.

He was leaning against a tree in the covered walk near Verner's Pride, the walk which led to the Willow Pond, his head bared, his brow bent with the most unmistakable signs of care, when something came flying down the path. A lady, with her silk dress turned over her shoulders, leaving only its white lining exposed to view. She was face to face with Lionel before she saw him.

"Lucy!" he exclaimed in extreme surprise.

Lucy Tempest laughed, and her dress fell into a more dignified position. "I and Decima went to call on Mrs. Bitterworth," she explained, "and Decima is staying there. It began to rain as I came out, so I turned into the back walk and put my dress up to save it. Am I not economical, Mr. Verner?"

She spoke quickly. Lionel thought it was done with a view to hide her agitation. "You cannot go home through this rain, Lucy. Let me take you indoors: we are close to Verner's Pride."

"No, thank you," said Lucy, hastily, "I must go back to Lady Verner. She will not be pleased at Decima's staying, therefore I must return. Poor Mrs. Bitterworth has had an attack of—what did they call it?—spasmodic croup, I think. She is better now, and begged Decima to stay with her the rest of the day: Mr. Bitterworth and the rest of them are out. Jan says it is highly dangerous while it lasts."

"She has had something of the sort before, I remember," observed Lionel. "I wish you would come in, Lucy. If you must go home, I will send you in the carriage: but I think you might stay and dine with us."

A soft colour rose to Lucy's cheeks. She had never made herself a familiar friend at Lionel Verner's. He had observed it, if no one else had. Sibylla had once said to her that she hoped they should be intimate, and that Verner's Pride would see a good deal of her. Lucy had never responded to the wish. A formal visit with Decima or Lady Verner when she could not help herself; but alone, in a social way, she had never put her foot over the threshold of Verner's Pride.

"You are very kind. I must go home at once. The rain will not hurt me."

Lionel, self-conscious, did not urge it further. "Will you remain here, then, under the trees, whilst I go home and get you an umbrella?"

"Oh dear, no, I don't want an umbrella; thank you all the same. I have my parasol, you see."

She took her dress up again as she spoke; not as before, but turning it a little. "Lady Verner scolds me so if I spoil my things,"

she said, in a tone of laughing apology. "She buys me very good ones, and orders me to take care of them. Good-bye, Mr. Verner."

Lionel took the hand which she held out. But he turned with her, and then loosed it again.

"You are not coming with me, Mr. Verner?"

"I shall see you home."

"But—I had rather you did not. I prefer—not to trouble you."

"Pardon me, Lucy. I cannot suffer you to go on alone."

It was a calm reply, quietly spoken. There were no fine phrases of its being "no trouble," that the "trouble was a pleasure," as others might indulge in. Fine phrases from the one to the other! Neither could have spoken them.

Lucy said no more, and they walked on side by side in silence, both unpleasantly self-conscious. Lionel's face had resumed its expression of care. Lucy had observed it when she came up to him; she observed it still.

"You look as though you had some trouble upon you," Mr. Verner," she said, after a while.

"Then I look what is the truth. I have one, Lucy."

"A heavy one?" asked Lucy, struck with his tone.

"A grievously heavy one. One that does not often fall to the lot of man."

"May I know it?" she timidly said.

"No, Lucy. If I could speak it, it would only give you pain; but it is of a private nature. Possibly it may be averted; it is at present a suspicion, a dread, not confirmed. Should it become so, you will learn it in common with the rest of the world."

She looked up at him, puzzled; sympathy in her mantling blush, her soft, dark, earnest eyes. He could not avoid contrasting that truthful face with another's frivolous one: and I cannot help it if you blame him. He did his best to shake off the feeling, and looked down at her with a careless smile.

"Don't let it give you concern, Lucy. My troubles must rest upon my own head."

"Have you seen any more of that man who was watching?—Roy."

"No. But I believe now that it was not Roy. He denies it, and I have had my suspicions diverted from him to another quarter."

"To one who may equally wish to do you harm?"

"I cannot say. If it be the party I—I suspect, he may deem that I have done him harm."

"You!" echoed Lucy. "And have you?"

"Yes. Unwittingly. It seems to be my fate, I think, to work harm upon—upon those whom I would especially shield from it."

Did he allude to her? Lucy thought so, and flushed vividly. At that moment the rain began to pour down heavily. They were then passing the thicket where those adventurous ghost-hunters had taken up their watch a few nights before, in view of the Willow Pond. Lucy stepped underneath their branches.

"Now," said Lionel, "should you have done well to accept my offer of Verner's Pride as a shelter, or not?"

"It may be only a passing storm," observed Lucy.

At this juncture, who should come striding through an opening in the trees, but Jan. Jan was on his way from Hook's cottage, a huge brown-cotton umbrella over his head, more useful than elegant.

"What, is that you, Miss Lucy! Well, I should as soon have thought of seeing Mrs. Peckaby's white donkey!"

"I am weather-bound, Jan," said Lucy.

"I have just come from Hook's," said Jan. "The girl's rather better," added he, unceremoniously. "She may possibly get through it now; there's just a shade of a chance. You can have my umbrella, Miss Lucy."

"Won't you let me go with you, Jan?" she asked.

"Oh, I can't stop to take you to Deerham Court," was Jan's answer, given with his accustomed plainness. "Here, Lionel!"

He handed over the umbrella, and was walking off. Lucy called out that he would get wet.

It amused Jan. A wetting more or less was nothing to him. Lionel took Lucy upon his arm again, and remarked upon her thin shoes.

"Don't tell Lady Verner," replied Lucy, with the pretty dependent manner which she had brought from school with her, and which she probably would never lose. "She would scold me for walking out in them."

Lionel smiled, and held the great umbrella over her, and so they reached Deerham Court.

"Here we are," said Lucy. "Lionel, please let me go in the back way—Jan's way. And then Lady Verner will not see me. She will say I ought not to have come through the rain."

"She'll see the shoes and the dress, and she'll say you should have stopped at Verner's Pride, as a well-trained young lady would have done," returned Lionel.

He took her safely to the back-door, opened it, and sent her in.

"Thank you very much," said she, holding out her hand. "I have given you a disagreeable walk here, and now I must give you one back again."

"Change your shoes at once, and don't talk foolish things," was Lionel's answer.

A wet walk back Lionel certainly had; but, wet or dry, it was all the same in his present frame of mind. Arrived at Verner's Pride, he found his wife dressed for dinner, the centre of a crowd of guests gay as she was. No opportunity, then, to question her about Frederick Massingbird's death, and how far Captain Cannonby was cognizant of particulars.

He had to change his own dress. It was barely done by dinner-time; and he sat down to table, the host of many guests. His brow was smooth, his speech courtly; how could any of them suspect that a terrible dread was gnawing at his heart? Sibylla, in rustling silk and a coronet of diamonds, sat opposite to him in all her dazzling beauty. Had she suspected what might be in store for her, those smiles would not have chased each other so incessantly on her lips.

Sibylla went up to bed early. She was full of caprices as a wayward child. Of a remarkably chilly nature—as is the case, sometimes, where the constitution is delicate—she would have a fire in her dressing-room night and morning all the year round, even in the heat of summer. It pleased her this evening to desert her guests suddenly: she had a headache, she said.

The weather on this day appeared to be as capricious as Sibylla, as strangely curious as the great fear which had fallen upon Lionel. The fine morning had changed to the rainy, misty, chilly afternoon; the afternoon to a clear, bright evening; and that evening had now become overcast with portentous clouds.

Without warning the storm burst forth: peals of thunder reverberated through the air, flashes of forked lightning played in the sky. Lionel hastened upstairs: he remembered how these storms terrified his wife.

She had knelt down to bury her head amidst the soft cushions of a chair when Lionel entered her dressing-room. "Sibylla!" he said.

Up she started at the sound of his voice, and flew to him. There lay her protection; and in spite of her ill-temper and her love of aggravation, she felt and recognized it. Lionel held her in his sheltering arms, bending her head down upon his breast, so that she might see no ray of light: as he had been wont to do in former storms. As a timid child was she at these times: humble, loving, gentle: she felt as if she were on the threshold of the next world, that the next moment might be her last. Others have been known to experience the same dread in a thunder-storm: and to be thus brought, as it were, face to face with death, takes the spirit out of people.

He stood, patiently holding her. Every time the thunder burst above their heads, he could feel her heart beating against his. One

of her arms was round him; the other he held. He did not speak: he only clasped her closer every now and then, that she might be reminded of her shelter.

Twenty minutes or so, and the violence of the storm abated. The lightning grew less frequent, the thunder distant and more distant. At length the sound wholly ceased, and the lightning subsided into that harmless sheet lightning, so beautiful to look upon in the far-off horizon.

"It is over," he whispered.

She lifted her head from its resting-place. Her blue eyes were bright with excitement, her delicate cheeks crimson, her golden hair fell around her. Her gala robes had been removed, with the diamond coronet, and the storm had surprised her writing a note in her dressing-gown. In spite of the sudden terror which overtook her, she did not forget to put the letter—so far as it had been written—safely away. It was not expedient that her husband's eyes should fall upon it: Sibylla had many answers to write now to importunate creditors.

"Are you sure, Lionel?"

"Quite sure. Come and see how clear it is. You are not alarmed at summer lightning."

He put his arm round her, and led her to the window. As he said, the sky was clear again. Nearly all traces of the storm had passed away: there had been no rain with it; and, but for the remembrance of its sound in their ears, they might have believed that it had not taken place. The broad lands of Verner's Pride lay spreading out before them; the lawns and the terrace underneath: the lightning illumined the heavens incessantly, rendering objects almost as clear as in the day.

Lionel held her to his side, his arm still round her. She trembled yet; trembled excessively; her bosom rose and fell beneath his hand.

"When I die, it will be in a thunder-storm," she whispered.

"You foolish girl!" he said, his tone half joking, wholly tender, "What can have given you this excessive fear of thunder, Sibylla?"

"I was always frightened at a thunder-storm. Deborah says mamma was. But I was not so *very* frightened until a storm I witnessed in Australia. It killed a man!" she added, shivering, and nestling nearer to Lionel.

"Ah!"

"It was only a few days before Frederick left me, when he and Captain Cannonby went away together," she continued. "We had hired a carriage, and had gone out of the town ever so far. There was something to be seen there; I forget what now; races, perhaps. I know a good many people went; and an awful thunder-storm came

on. Some ran under the trees for shelter; some would not: and the lightning killed a man. Oh, Lionel, I shall never forget it! I saw him carried past; I saw his face! Since then I have felt ready to die myself with the fear."

She turned her face, and hid it upon his bosom. Lionel did not attempt to soothe the *fear;* he knew that for such fear time is the only cure. He whispered soothing words to *her;* he fondly stroked her golden hair. In these moments, when she was gentle, yielding, clinging to him for protection, three parts of his old love for her would come back again. The lamp, which had been turned on to its full light, was behind them, so that they might have been visible enough to any one standing in the nearer portion of the grounds.

"Captain Cannonby went away with Frederick Massingbird," observed Lionel, approaching by degrees the questions he wished to ask. "Did they start together?"

"Yes. Don't talk about it, Lionel."

"My dear wife, I must talk about it," he gravely answered. "You have always put me off in this manner, so that I know little or nothing of the circumstances. I have a reason for wishing to become cognizant of those past particulars. Surely," he added, a shade of deeper feeling in his tone, "at this distance of time it cannot be so very painful to your feelings to speak of Frederick Massingbird. *I* am by your side."

"What is your reason for wishing to know?"

"A little matter that regarded him and Cannonby. Was Cannonby with him when he died?"

Sibylla, subdued still, yielded to the wish, as she would probably have yielded at no other time.

"Of course he was with him. They were only a day's journey from Melbourne. I forget the name of the place: a sort of small village or settlement, I believe, where the people halted that were going to the diggings, or returning. Frederick was taken worse as soon as they got there, and in a few hours he died."

"Cannonby remaining with him?"

"Yes. I am sure I have told you this before, Lionel. I told it to you on the night of my return."

He was aware that she had. He could not say: "But I wish to press you upon the points; to ascertain beyond doubt that Frederick Massingbird did really die; that he is not living." "Did Cannonby stay there until he was buried?" he asked aloud.

"Yes."

"You are sure of this?"

Sibylla looked at him curiously. She could not think why he was recalling this; why want to know it. "I am sure of it only so far as that Captain Cannonby told me so," she replied.

The reservation struck upon him with a chill: it seemed a confirmation of his worst fears. Sibylla continued, for he did not speak.

"Of course he stayed with him until he was buried. When Captain Cannonby came back to me at Melbourne, he said he had waited to lay him in the ground. Why should he have said it, if he did not do so?"

"True," murmured Lionel.

"He said the burial-service had been read over him. I remember that, well. I reproached Captain Cannonby with not having come back to me immediately, or sent for me that I might at least have seen him dead, if not living. He excused himself by saying that he did not think I should like to see him: and he had waited to bury him before returning."

Lionel fell into a reverie. If this, that Captain Cannonby had stated, was correct, there was no doubt that Frederick Massingbird was safely dead and buried. But he could not be sure that it was correct: Captain Cannonby may not have relished waiting to see a dead man buried; although he had affirmed as much to Sibylla. A thousand pounds would Lionel have given out of his pocket at that moment, for one minute's interview with Captain Cannonby.

"Lionel!"

The call came from Sibylla with sudden intensity, half startling him. One of her fingers was pointed to the lawn.

"Who's that—peeping forth from underneath the yew-tree?"

The same place, the same tree which had been pointed at by Lucy Tempest! An impulse, for which Lionel could not have accounted, caused him to turn and put out the lamp.

"Who can it be?" wondered Sibylla. "He appears to be watching us. How foolish of any of them to go out! *I* should not feel safe under a tree, although that lightning is only sheet-lightning."

Every perceptive faculty that Lionel Verner possessed was strained upon the spot. He could make out a tall man; a man whose figure bore—unless his eyes and his imagination deceived him—a strong resemblance to Frederick Massingbird. Had it come to it? Were he and his rival face to face; was she, by his side now, about to be bandied between them?—belonging, except by priority of the first marriage ceremony, no more to one than to the other? A stifled cry, suppressed instantly, escaped his lips; his pulses stood still, and then throbbed on with painful violence.

"Can you discern him, Lionel?" she asked. "He is going away—going back into the trees. Perhaps because he can't see us any longer, now that you have put the light out. Who is it? Why should he have stood there, watching us?"

Lionel drew her to him with an impulsive gesture. He would have sacrificed his life willingly to save Sibylla from the terrible misfortune that appeared to be falling upon her.

CHAPTER LIII.

A MEETING ON THE RIVER.

A MERRY breakfast-table. Sibylla, for a wonder, was up, and present at it. The rain of the preceding day, the storm of the night had entirely passed away, and as fine a morning as could be wished was smiling upon the earth.

"Which of you went out before the storm was over, and ventured under the great yew-tree?"

It was Mrs. Verner who spoke. She looked at the different gentlemen present, and they looked at her. They did not know what she meant.

"You *were* under it, one of you," persisted Sibylla.

All, except one, protested that they had neither been out nor under the tree. That one—it happened to be Mr. Gordon, of whom casual mention has been made—confessed to having been on the lawn, so far as crossing it went; but he did not go near the tree.

"I went out with my cigar," he observed, "and had strolled some distance from the house when the storm came on. I stood in the middle of a field and watched it. It was grand."

"I wonder you were not brought home dead!" ejaculated Sibylla.

Mr. Gordon laughed. "If you once witnessed the thunder-storms that we get in the tropics, Mrs. Verner, you would not associate these with danger."

"I have seen dreadful thunder-storms, apart from what we get here, as well as you, Mr. Gordon," returned Sibylla. "Perhaps you will deny that any one's ever killed by them in this country. But why did you halt underneath the yew-tree?"

"I did not," he repeated. "I crossed the lawn, straight on to the upper end of the terrace. I did not go near the tree."

"Some one did, if you did not. They were staring up at my dressing-room window. I was standing at it with Mr. Verner."

Mr. Gordon shook his head. "Not guilty, so far as I am concerned, Mrs. Verner. I met some man, when I was coming home, plunging into the trees as I emerged from them. It was he, possibly."

"What man?" questioned Sibylla.

"I did not know him. He was a stranger. A tall, dark man, with stooping shoulders, and something black upon his cheek."

"Something black upon his cheek?" repeated Sibylla, thinking the words sounded oddly.

"It looked like a large black mark. His cheek was white—sallow would be the better term—and he wore no whiskers, so it was a conspicuous brand. At the moment he passed me, the lightning rendered the atmosphere as light as——"

"Sibylla!" almost shouted Lionel, "we are waiting for more tea in this quarter. Never mind Gordon."

They looked at him in surprise. He was leaning towards his wife; his face crimson, his tones agitated. Sibylla stared at him, and said, if he called out like that, she would not come down another morning. Lionel replied, talking fast; and just then the letters were brought in. Altogether, the subject of the man with the mark dropped out of the discussion.

Breakfast over, Lionel put his arm within Mr. Gordon's and drew him on to the terrace. Not to question him about the man he had seen: Lionel would have been glad that that encounter should pass out of Mr. Gordon's remembrance, as affording less chance of Sibylla's hearing it again; but to obtain information on another topic. He had been rapidly making up his mind during the latter part of breakfast, and had come to a decision.

"Gordon, can you inform me where Captain Cannonby is to be found?"

"Can you inform me where the comet that visited us last year is to be found?" returned Mr. Gordon. "I would almost as soon undertake to discover the locality of the one as of the other. Cannonby did go to Paris; but where he may be now, is quite another affair."

"Was he going there to make any stay?"

"I fancy not. Most likely he is back in London by this time. Had he told me he was coming back, I should have paid no attention to it. He never knows his own mind two hours together."

"I particularly wish to see him," observed Lionel. "Can you give me any address where he may be found in London?—if he has returned?"

"Yes. His brother's in Westminster. I can give you the exact number and address by referring to my note-book. When Cannonby's in London, he makes it his head-quarters. If he is away, his brother may know where he is."

"His brother may be out of town also. Few men are in it at this season."

"If they can get out. But Dr. Cannonby can't. He is a physician, and must remain at his post, in season or out of season."

"I am going up to town to-day," remarked Lionel, "and——"

"You are! For long?"

"Back to-morrow, I hope: perhaps to-night. If you will give me the address, I will take it down."

Lionel made a note of it: but Mr. Gordon told him there was no necessity to do so: any little ragged boy in the street could direct him to Dr. Cannonby's. Then he went to make his proposed journey known to Sibylla. She was standing near one of the terrace pillars, looking up at the sky, her eyes shaded by her hand. Lionel drew her to an unoccupied room.

"Sibylla, a little matter of business is calling me to London," he said. "If I can catch the half-past ten train, I may be home again to night, but it will be late."

"How sudden!" cried Sibylla. "Why didn't you tell me? What weather shall we have to-day, do you think?"

"Fine. But it is of little consequence to me whether it be fine or wet."

"Oh! I was not thinking of you," was the careless reply. "I want it to be fine for our archery."

"Good-bye," he said, stooping to kiss her. "Take care of yourself."

"Lionel, mind, I shall have the ponies," was her answer, given in a pouting, pretty, affected manner.

Lionel smiled, shook his head, took another kiss, and left her. Oh, if he could only shield her from the tribulation that too surely seemed to be ominously approaching!

The lightest and fleetest carriage he possessed had been made ready, and he caught the train. If those who saw him depart could only have divined the errand he was bent upon, what a commotion would have spread over Deerham! If the handsome lady, seated opposite to him, the only other passenger in that compartment, could only have read the cause which rendered him so self-absorbed, so insensible to her attractions, she would have gazed at him with far more interest.

"Who is that gentleman?" she privately asked of the guard when she obtained the opportunity.

"Mr. Verner, of Verner's Pride."

He sat back on his seat, heeding nothing. Had all the pretty women in the kingdom been ranged before him in a row, they had been nothing to Mr. Verner just then. Had Lucy Tempest been there, he had been equally regardless of her. If Frederick Massinbird were indeed in life, Verner's Pride was no longer his: but it was not of that he thought: it was of the calamity in which it would involve his wife. A calamity that, to the refined, sensitive mind of Lionel Verner, was almost worse than death itself.

What would the journey bring forth for him? Should he succeed in seeing Captain Cannonby? He waited the fiat with feverish heat; and wished the express train would travel faster.

The terminus gained at last, a hansom took him to Dr. Cannonby's. It was half-past two o'clock. He leaped out of the cab and rang, entering the hall when the door was opened.

"Can I see Dr. Cannonby?"

"The doctor's just gone out, sir. He will be home at five."

It was a sort of checkmate, and Lionel stood looking at the servant—as if the man could telegragh some impossible message to his master to bring him back then and there.

"Is Captain Cannonby staying here?" was his next question.

"No, sir. He was staying here, but went away this morning."

"He is home from Paris then?"

"He returned two or three days ago, sir," replied the servant.

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"I don't, sir. I fancy it's somewhere in the country."

"Dr. Cannonby would know?"

"I dare say he would, sir. I should think so."

Lionel turned to the door. Of what use his lingering? He went down the steps, and the man closed the door upon him. Where should he go now? What should he do with himself for the next two and a half mortal hours? His club? Or any of the old haunts of his London life? Not he: familiar faces might be in town; and he was in no mood for familiar faces to-day.

Sauntering hither and thither, he came to Westminster Bridge. One of the steamers was approaching the pier to take in passengers, on its way down the river. For want of some better way in which to employ his time, Lionel went down to the pier, and stepped on board.

Does *any* thing in this world happen by chance? What secret unknown impulse could have sent Lionel Verner on board that steamer? Had Dr. Cannonby been at home he would not have gone near it: had he turned to the right instead of the left, on leaving Dr. Cannonby's house, the boat would never have seen him.

It was not crowded, as those steamers sometimes are, suggesting visions of the bottom of the river. The day was fine; warm for September, but not too warm; to glide down the stream was delightful. With a heart at ease, Lionel would have found it so. As it was, he could scarcely have told whether he was going down the stream or up, whether it was wet or dry. He could see only one thing—the image of Frederick Massingbird.

As the boat drew up to the Temple Pier, the only person waiting to embark was a woman; a little body, in a faded brown silk gown. Whether, seeing his additional freight was to be so trifling, the master

of the steamer did not take the usual care in bringing the vessel alongside, certain it is, that in some way the woman fell in stepping on board; her knees on the boat, her feet over the water. Lionel, who was sitting near, sprang forward and pulled her out of danger.

"I declare I never ought to come on board these nasty steamers!" she exclaimed, as he placed her in a seat. "I'm greatly obliged to you, sir: I might have gone in, else; there's no saying. The last time I was on board one I was in danger of being killed. I fell through the port-hole, sir."

"Indeed!" responded Lionel, who could not be so discourteous as not to answer. "Perhaps your sight is not very good?"

"Well, yes it is, sir, as good as most folks, at middle-age. I get timid on board them, and it makes me confused and awkward, and I suppose I don't mind where I put my feet. This was in Liverpool, a week or two ago. It was a passenger-ship just in from Australia, and the bustle and confusion on board was dreadful—they say it's mostly so with vessels that are coming home. I had gone down to meet my husband, sir; he has been away four years—and it's a pity he ever went, for all the good he has done. But he's back safe himself, so I must not grumble."

"That's something," said Lionel.

"True, sir. It would have been a strange thing if I had lost my life just as he had come home. And I should, but for a gentleman on board. He seized me by the middle, and somehow contrived to drag me up again. A strong man he must have been! I shall always remember him with gratitude, I'm sure; as I shall you, sir. His name, my husband told me afterwards, was Massingbird."

All Lionel's inertness was gone at the sound of the name. "Massingbird!" he repeated.

"Yes, sir. He had come home in the ship from the same port as my husband—Melbourne. Quite a gentleman, my husband said, with grand relations in England. He had not been out there over long—hardly as long as my husband, I fancy—and my husband doesn't think he has made much, any more than he has himself."

Lionel had regained all his outward impassiveness. He stood by the gossiping woman, his arms folded. "What sort of a looking man was this Mr. Massingbird?" he asked. "I knew a gentleman once of that name, who went to Australia."

The woman glanced up at him, measuring his height. "I should say he was as tall as you, sir, or close upon it, but he was broader, and had a stoop in the shoulders. He was dark; had dark eyes and hair, and a pale face. Not the clear paleness of your own face, sir, but one of those sallow faces that get darker and yellower with travelling; never turn red."

Every word was as fresh testimony to the suspicion that it was Frederick Massingbird. "Had he a black mark upon his cheek?" inquired Lionel.

"Likely he might have had, sir, but I couldn't see his cheeks. He wore a fur cap with the ears tied down. My husband saw a good bit of him on the voyage, though he was only a middle-deck passenger, and the gentleman was a cabin. His friends have had a surprise before this," she continued, after a pause. "He told my husband that they all supposed him dead; had thought he had been dead these two years and more; and he had never sent word home to contradict it."

Then it *was* Frederick Massingbird! Lionel Verner left the woman's side, and leaned over the rail of the steamer, apparently watching the water. He could not, by any dint of reasoning or supposition, make out the mystery. How Frederick Massingbird could be alive; or, being alive, why he had not come home before to claim Sibylla—why he had not claimed her before she left Australia—why he did not claim her now that he had come. A man without a wife might go roving where he would and as long as he would, letting his friends think him dead if it pleased him; but a man with a wife could not, in his sober senses, be supposed to act so. It was a strange thing, his meeting with this woman—a singular coincidence: one that he would hardly have believed in, if related to him as happening to another.

It was striking five when he again knocked at Dr. Cannonby's. He wished to see Captain Cannonby still; it would be the ultimate confirmation: but he had no doubt whatever that that gentleman's report would be: "I saw Frederick Massingbird die—as I believed, and I left him immediately. I conclude that I must have been in error in supposing that he was dead."

Dr. Cannonby had returned, the servant said. He desired Lionel to walk in, and threw open the door of the room. Seven or eight people were sitting in it, waiting. The servant had evidently mistaken him for a patient, and placed him there to wait his turn with the rest. He took his card from his pocket, wrote on it a few words, and desired the servant to carry it to his master.

The man came back with an apology. "I beg your pardon, sir. Will you step this way?"

The physician was bowing a lady out as he entered the room—a room lined with books, and containing casts of heads. He came forward to shake hands, a cordial, pleasant man. He knew Lionel by reputation, but had never seen him.

"My visit was not to you, but to your brother," explained Lionel. "I was hoping to have found him here."

"Then he and you have been playing at cross-purposes to-day,"

remarked the doctor, with a smile. "Lawrence started this morning for Verner's Pride."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lionel. "Cross-purposes indeed!" he muttered to himself.

"He heard some news in Paris which concerned you, I believe, and hastened home to pay you a visit."

"Which concerned me!" repeated Lionel.

"Or, rather, Mrs. Massingbird—Mrs. Verner, I should say."

A sickly smile crossed Lionel's lips. Mrs. Massingbird! Was it already known? "Why," he asked, "did you call her Mrs. Massingbird?"

"I beg your pardon for my inadvertence, Mr. Verner," was Dr. Cannonby's reply. "Lawrence knew her as Mrs. Massingbird, and on his return from Australia he frequently spoke of her to me as Mrs. Massingbird, so that I fell into the habit of thinking of her as such. It was not until he went to Paris that he heard she had exchanged the name for that of Verner."

A thought crossed Lionel that *this* was the news which had taken Captain Cannonby down to him. He might know of the existence of Frederick Massingbird, and had gone to break the news to him, Lionel; to tell him that his wife was not his wife.

"You do not know precisely what his business was with me?" he inquired quite wistfully.

"No, I don't. I don't know that it was much beyond the pleasure of seeing you and Mrs. Verner."

Lionel rose. "If I——"

"But you will stay and dine with me, Mr. Verner?"

"Thank you; I must go back at once. I wished to be home this evening if possible, and there's nothing to prevent it now."

"A letter or two has come for Lawrence since the morning," observed the doctor as he shook hands. "Will you take charge of them for him?"

"With pleasure."

Dr. Cannonby turned to a letter-rack over the mantel-piece, selected three letters from it, and handed them to Lionel.

Back again all the weary way. His suspicions were no longer suspicions now, but certainties. The night grew dark: it was not darker than the cloud which had fallen upon his spirit.

Thought was busy with his brain. How could it be otherwise? Should he get home to find the news public property? Had Captain Cannonby made it known to Sibylla? Most fervently did he hope not. Better that he, Lionel, should be by her side to help her to bear it when the dreadful news came out. Next came another thought. Suppose Frederick Massingbird should have declared himself; should have gone to Verner's Pride to take pos-

session?—*his* home now; his wife. Lionel might get back to find that he had no longer a place there.

Lionel found his carriage waiting at the station. He had ordered it to be so. Wigham was with it. A very coward now, he scarcely dared ask questions.

"Has Captain Cannonby arrived at the house to-day, do you know, Wigham?"

"Who, sir?"

"A strange gentleman from London. Captain Cannonby."

"I can't rightly say, sir. I have been about in the stables all day. I saw a strange gentleman cross the yard just at dinner-time—one I'd never seen before. May be it was him."

A feeling came over Lionel that he could not see Captain Cannonby before them all. Better send for him privately, and get the communication over. What his after-course would be was another matter. Yes; better in all ways.

"Drive round to the yard, Wigham," he said, as the coachman was about to turn on to the terrace. And Wigham obeyed.

He stepped out. He entered by the back-door, almost as if he were stealing into the house, traversed the passages, and gained the lighted hall. At the very moment that he put his feet on its tessellated floor, a sudden commotion was heard upstairs. A door was flung open, and Sibylla, with cheeks flaming and breath panting, flew down, her cries echoing through the house. She saw Lionel, and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Lionel, what is this wicked story?" she sobbed. "It is not true! It cannot be true that I am not your wife; that——"

"Hush, my darling!" he whispered, placing his hand across her mouth. "We are not alone!"

They certainly were not! Out of the drawing-rooms had poured the guests. Deborah West stood on the stairs like a statue, her hands clapsed; Mademoiselle Benoite frantically inquired what anybody had been doing to her mistress. All stared in amazement. She, in that terrible state of agitation; Lionel supporting her with his white, haughty face.

"It is nothing," he said, waving them off. "Mrs. Verner is not well. Come with me, Sibylla."

He drew her into the study, closed the door, and bolted it. She clung to him as one in the extremity of terror.

"Oh, Lionel! is it true that he has come back? That he did not die? What will become of me! Tell me that they have been deceiving me; that it is not true!"

He could not tell her so. He wound his arms tenderly round her and held her face to him, and laid his own upon it. "Strive for calmness," he murmured, his heart aching for her. "I will protect you as long as the power to do so shall be mine."

CHAPTER LIV.

TYNN PUMPED DRY.

MISS DEBORAH WEST did not believe in ghosts. Miss Deb, setting aside a few personal weaknesses and vanities, was a strong-minded female, and no more believed in ghosts than she did in Master Cheese's delicate constitution, which required to be supplied with an unlimited quantity of tarts and other dainties to keep up his strength between meals. The rumour respecting Frederick Massingbird, that his ghost had arrived from Australia, and "walked," reached the ears of Miss Deb. It reached them in this way.

Miss Deb and her sister, compelled to economy by the scanty allowance afforded them by Dr. West, had no more helpmates in the household department than were absolutely necessary, and the surgery boy, Bob, found himself sometimes pressed into aiding in the domestic service. One evening Miss Deb entered the surgery, and caught Master Cheese revelling in a hatful of walnuts by gaslight. This was the evening of the storm, previously mentioned.

"Where's Bob?" asked she. "I want a message taken to Mrs. Broom's about those pickled mushrooms she is doing for me."

"Bob's out," responded Master Cheese. "Have a walnut, Miss Deb?"

"I don't mind. Are they ripe?" answered Miss Deb.

Master Cheese, the greediest boy alive, picked out the smallest he could find, politely cracked it with his teeth, and handed it to her.

"You'll not get Bob over to Broom's at this hour," cried he. "Jan can't get him to Mother Hook's with her medicine after dark. Unless it's made up so that he can take it by daylight, they have to send for it."

"What's that for?" asked Miss Deb.

Master Cheese cracked away at his walnuts. "You have not heard the tale that's going about, I suppose, Miss Deb?" he presently said.

"I have not heard any tale," she answered.

"And I don't know that I must tell it you," continued Master Cheese. "Jan ordered me to hold my tongue indoors."

"It would be more respectful, Master Cheese, if you said Mr. Jan," rebuked Miss Deborah. "I have told you so often."

"Who cares?" returned Master Cheese. "Jan doesn't. The fact is, Miss Deb, there's a ghost about at night just now."

"Have they got up that folly again? Rachel Frost rests a great deal quieter in her grave than some of you do in your beds."

"Ah, but it's not Rachel's this time," significantly responded Master Cheese. "It's somebody else's."

"Whose is it, then?" asked Miss Deb, struck by his manner.

"I'll tell you if you won't tell Jan. It's—don't start, Miss Deb—it's Fred Massingbird's."

Miss Deb did not start. She looked keenly at Master Cheese, believing he might be playing a joke upon her. But there were no signs of joking in his countenance. It looked, on the contrary, singularly serious, not to say awe-struck, as he leaned forward to bring it nearer Miss Deborah's.

"It is a fact that Fred Massingbird's ghost is walking," he continued. "Lots have seen it. I have seen it. You'd have heard of it, as everybody else has, if you had not been Mrs. Verner's sister. It's an unpleasantly queer thing for her, you know, Miss Deb."

"What utter absurdity!" cried Deborah.

"Wait till you see it, before you say it's absurdity," replied Master Cheese. "If it's not Fred Massingbird's ghost, it is somebody's that's his exact image."

Miss Deborah sat down on a stone jar, and got Master Cheese to tell her the whole story. That he should add a few exaggerations, and so increase the marvel, was only natural. But Deborah West heard sufficient to send her mind into a state of perplexity.

"You say Mr. Jan knows of this?" she asked.

"There's nobody about that doesn't know of it except you and the folks at Verner's Pride," responded Master Cheese. "I say, don't you go and tell Jan that you made me betray it to you, Miss Deb! You'll get me into a row if you do."

But this was the very thing that Miss Deb resolved to do. Not to get Master Cheese into a "row," but that she saw no other way of allaying her uneasiness. Ghosts were utterly excluded from Deborah West's creed; and why so many people should be suddenly testifying that Frederick Massingbird's was to be seen, she could not understand. That there must be something more in it than the ordinary absurdity of such tales, the state of Alice Hook appeared to bear witness to.

"Can Bob be spared to go over to Broome's in the morning?" she asked, after a long pause, given apparently to the contemplation of Master Cheese's intense enjoyment of his walnuts; in reality, to deep thought.

"Well, I don't know," answered the young gentleman, who was never ready to accord the services of Bob indoors, lest it might involve any little extra amount of exertion to himself. "There's a

sight of medicine to be taken out just now. Jan's got a great deal to do, and *I* am nearly worked off my legs."

"It looks like it," retorted Miss Deborah. "Your legs will never be much the worse for the amount of work *you* do. Where's Mr. Jan?"

"He went out to go to Hook's," replied Master Cheese, a desperately hard walnut proving nearly too much for his teeth. "He'll take a round, I dare say, before he comes in."

Deborah returned indoors. Though not very much inclined to reticence in general, she observed it now, saying nothing to Amilly. The storm came on, and they sat and watched it. Supper-time approached, and Master Cheese was punctual. He found some pickled herrings on the table, of which he was uncommonly fond, and ate them as long as Miss West would supply his plate. The meal was over when Jan came in.

"Don't trouble to have anything brought back for me," said he. "I'll take some bread and cheese." He was not like his assistant: his growing days were over.

Master Cheese went straight up to bed. He liked to do so as soon as supper was over, lest any summons came, and he should have to go out. Easy Jan, no matter how tired he might be, would attend himself, sooner than wake up Master Cheese—a ceremony more easily attempted than accomplished. Fortifying himself with about a pound of sweet cake, which he kept in his box, as a dessert after the herrings and to refresh his dreams, Master Cheese put himself into bed.

Jan meanwhile finished his bread and cheese, and rose. "I wonder whether I shall get a whole night of it to-night?" said he, stretching himself. "I didn't have much bed last night."

"Have you to go out again, Mr. Jan?"

"No. I shall look to the books a bit, and then turn in. Good night, Miss Deborah; good night, Miss Amilly."

"Good night," they answered.

Amilly drew to the fire. The chilly afternoon rain had caused them to have one lighted. She put her feet on the fender, and found the warmth comfortable. Deborah sent the supper-tray away, and then left the room. Stealing out by the side-door quietly, she tripped across the narrow path of wet gravel, and entered the surgery. Jan had an account-book open on the counter, and was leaning over it, a pen in hand.

"Don't be frightened, Mr. Jan; it's only me," said Deborah, who did not at all times confine herself to the strict rules of grammar. "I'll shut the door, if you please, for I want to say a word to yourself alone."

"Is it more physic you want?" asked Jan. "Has the pain in the side come again?"

"It is not about pains or physic," she answered, drawing nearer to the counter. "Mr. Jan"—dropping her voice to a confidential whisper—"would you be so good as to tell me the truth of this story that is going about?"

Jan paused. "What story?" he rejoined.

"This ghost story. They are saying, I understand, that—that—they are saying something about Frederick Massingbird."

"Did Cheese supply you with the information?" cried Jan, imperturbable as ever.

"He did. But I must beg you not to scold him for it—as he thought you might do. It was I who drew the story from him. He said you cautioned him not to speak of it to me and Amilly. I quite appreciate your motives, Mr. Jan, and feel that it was very considerate of you. But now that I have heard it, I want to learn particulars from some one more reliable than Master Cheese."

"I promised Lionel I'd say nothing to any soul in the parish," said Jan, single-minded as a child. "But he won't mind my making you an exception—as you have heard it. You are Sibylla's sister."

"*You* don't believe in its being a ghost?"

Jan grinned. "I?" cried he. "No, I don't."

"Then what do you suppose it is, that's frightening people? And why should they be frightened?"

Jan sat himself down on the counter, and whirled his legs over to the other side, clearing the gallipots, so that he faced Miss Deborah. Not to waste time, he took the mortar before him. And there he was at his ease, pounding away.

"What should you think it is?" inquired he.

"How can I think, Mr. Jan? Until an hour or two ago, I had not heard of the rumour. I suppose it is some one who walks about at night to frighten people. But it is curious that he should look like Frederick Massingbird. Can you understand it?"

"I am afraid I can," replied Jan.

"Will you tell me, please, what you think?"

"Can't you guess, Miss Deb?"

Miss Deb looked at him, beginning to think his manner as mysterious as Master Cheese's had been.

"I can't guess at all," she presently said. "Please tell me."

"Then don't go and drop down in a fit when you hear it," was the rejoinder of Jan. "I suppose it is Fred himself."

The words took her utterly by surprise. Not at first did she understand their meaning. She stared at Jan, her eyes and her mouth gradually opening.

"Fred himself?" she mechanically uttered.

"I suppose so. Fred himself. Not his ghost."

"Do you mean that he has come to life again?" she rapidly rejoined.

"Well, you can call it so if you like," said Jan. "I expect that, in point of fact, he never died. The report of his death must have been erroneous: one of those mistakes that do sometimes happen to astonish the world."

Deborah West took in the full sense of the words, and sank down on the big stone jar. Her hands began to twitch with emotion.

"You mean that he is alive?—that he has never been dead?" she gasped.

Jan nodded.

"Oh, Mr. Jan! Then, what is—what is Sibylla?"

"Ah," said Jan, "that's just it. She's the wife of both of 'em—as you may say."

For any small surprise or evil, Miss Deborah would have gone off into a succession of screams, or half-faints. *This* evil was all too real, too terrible. She sat with her trembling hands clasped to pain, looking hopelessly at Jan.

He told her all he knew; all that was said by others.

"Dan Duff's nothing," remarked he; "and Cheese is nothing; and others, who profess to have seen it, are nothing: and old Frost's not much. But I'd back Bourne's sound sense against the world, and I'd back Broom's."

"And they have both seen it?"

"Both," replied Jan. "Both are sure that it is Frederick Massingbird."

"What will Mr. Verner do?" she asked, looking round with a shudder, and speaking in a whisper.

"Oh, that's his affair," said Jan. "It's hard to guess what he may do: he is one that won't be dictated to. If it were some people's case, they'd say to Sibylla, 'Now you have two husbands, choose which you'll have, and keep to him.'"

"Good Heavens, Mr. Jan!" exclaimed Miss Deb, shocked at the loose sentiments the words appeared to indicate. "And suppose she should choose the second? Have you thought of the sin? The second *can't* be her husband. It would be as bad as those Mormons."

"Looking at it from a practical point of view, I can't see that it makes much difference which of the two she chooses," returned Jan. "If Fred was her husband once, Lionel's her husband now. Practically I say, you know, Miss Deb."

Miss Deb thought the question was rather verging into metaphysics, a branch of science which she did not understand, and so was content to leave the controversy.

"Any way, it is dreadful for her," she said, shivering again. "Oh, Mr. Jan, do you think it can really be true?"

"*I* think that there's not a doubt of it," he answered, stopping his pounding. "But you need not think so, Miss Deb."

"How am I to help thinking so?" she simply asked.

"You needn't think either way until it is proved. As I suppose it must be, shortly. Let it rest till then."

"No, Mr. Jan, I differ from you. It is a question that ought to be sought out and settled; not left to rest. Does Sibylla know it?"

"Not she. Who'd tell her? Lionel won't, I know. It was for her sake that he bound me to silence."

"She ought to be told, Mr. Jan. She ought to leave her husband—I mean Mr. Lionel—this very hour, and shut herself up until the doubt has become certainty."

"Where should she shut herself?" inquired Jan, opening his eyes. "In a convent? Law, Miss Deb! If some one came and told me I had two wives, should you say I ought to make a start for the nearest monastery? How would my patients get on?"

Rather metaphysical again. Miss Deb drew Jan back to plain details—the histories of the various ghostly encounters. Jan talked and pounded: she sat on her hard seat and listened: her brain more perplexed than it could have been with any metaphysics known to science. Eleven o'clock disturbed them, and Miss Deborah started as if she had been shot.

"How could I keep you until this time?" she exclaimed. "And you scarcely in bed for some nights past!"

"Never mind, Miss Deb," answered good-natured Jan. "It's all in the day's work."

He opened the door for her, and then bolted himself in for the night. For the night, that is, if Deerham would allow it to him. Hook's daughter was slowly progressing towards recovery, and Jan would not need to go to her.

Amilly was nodding over the fire, or, rather, where the fire had been, for it had gone out. She inquired with wonder what her sister had been doing, and where she had been. Deborah replied that she had been busy; and they went upstairs to bed.

But there was no sleep for one of them. Deborah West lay awake through the livelong night, tossing from side to side in her thought and perplexity. Somewhat strict in her notions, she deemed it a matter of stern necessity, of positive duty, that Sibylla should retire, at any rate for a time, from the scenes of busy life. To enable her to do this, the news must be broken to her. But how!

Ay, how? Deborah West rose in the morning with the difficulty unsolved. She supposed she must do it herself. She believed it was as much a duty laid upon her, to impart these tidings to Sibylla,

as to separate herself from all social ties, the instant it was so imparted, would be the duty of Sibylla herself. Deborah West went about her occupations that morning, one imperative sentence ever in her thoughts—"It must be done! it must be done!"

She carried it about with her throughout the whole day. She shrank, both for Sibylla's sake and her own, from the task she was imposing upon herself; and, as we all do when we have an unpleasant office to perform, she put it off to the last. Early in the morning she had said, I will go to Verner's Pride after breakfast and tell her; breakfast over: I will have my dinner first and then go.

But the afternoon passed on, and she went not. Every trivial domestic duty was made an excuse for delay. Miss Amilly, finding her sister unusually bad company, went out to take tea with some friends. The time came for ordering in tea at home, and still Deborah had not gone.

She made the tea and presided at the table. But she could eat nothing—to the inward gratification of Master Cheese. There happened to be shrimps: a dish that gentleman preferred, if anything, to pickled herrings, and by Miss Deborah's failing appetite he was able to secure her share and his own. He would uncommonly have liked to secure Jan's share also; but Miss Deborah filled a plate and put them aside, against Jan's coming in. Jan's pressure of work had caused him of late to be irregular at his meals.

Scarcely was tea over, and Master Cheese gone, when Mr. Bourne called. Deborah, the one thought uppermost in her mind, closed the door, and spoke out what she had heard. The terrible fear, her own distress, Jan's belief that it was Fred himself, Jan's representation that Mr. Bourne also believed it. Mr. Bourne, leaning forward until his pale face and his iron-grey hair almost touched hers, whispered in answer that he did not think there was a doubt of it.

Then Deborah nerved herself to the task. On the departure of the Vicar she started for Verner's Pride and asked to see Sibylla. The servants would have shown her to the drawing-room, but she preferred to go up to Sibylla's chamber. The company were yet in the dining-room.

How long Sibylla kept her waiting there, she scarcely knew. Sibylla was not in the habit of putting herself to inconvenience for her sisters. The message was taken to her—that Miss West waited in her chamber—as she entered the drawing-room. And there Sibylla let her wait. One or two more messages to the same effect were subsequently delivered: they produced no impression, and Deborah began to think she should not get to see her that night.

But Sibylla came up at length, and Deborah entered upon her task. Whether she accomplished it clumsily, or whether Sibylla's ill-disciplined mind was wholly in fault, certain it is that there ensued a loud and unpleasant scene. The scene to which you were a witness. Scarcely giving herself time to take in more than the bare fact hinted at by Deborah—that her first husband was believed to be alive—not waiting to inquire a single particular, she burst from the room and went shrieking down, flying into the arms of Lionel, who at that moment had entered. Lionel Verner could not speak comfort to his wife. Or, at the best, comfort of a most negative nature. He held her to him in the study, the door locked against intruders. They were somewhat at cross-purposes. Lionel supposed that the information had been imparted to her by Captain Cannonby. He never doubted but she had been told that Frederick Massingbird had returned and was on the scene; that he might come in at any moment—even then as they spoke—to put in his claim to her. Sibylla, on the contrary, did not think (as far as she was capable of thinking) that Lionel had had any previous information of the matter.

"What am I to do?" she cried, her emotion becoming hysterical. "Oh, Lionel! don't you give me up!"

"I would have returned earlier had there been means to do so," he soothingly said, wisely evading all answer to the last suggestion. "I feared he would be telling you in my absence; better that you should have heard it from me."

She lifted her face to look at him. "Then you know it!"

"I have known it this day or two. My journey to-day——"

She broke out into a violent emotion, trembling, clinging to Lionel, calling out that she would not leave him. All his efforts were directed to quieting her. He implored her to be tranquil; to remember there were listeners around. He pointed out that, until the blow actually fell, there was no necessity for those listeners to be made cognizant of it. All that he *could* do for her protection and comfort, he would do, he earnestly said. And Sibylla subsided into a softer mood, and cried quietly.

"I'd rather die," she sobbed, "than have this disgrace brought upon me."

Lionel placed her in the large arm-chair, which remained in the study still: the old arm-chair of Mr. Verner. He stood by her and held her hands, his pale face, grave, sad, loving, bent towards her with the most earnest sympathy. She lifted her eyes to it, whispering.

"Will they say you are not my husband?"

"Hush, Sibylla! There are moments, even yet, when I deceive myself into a fancy that it may somehow be averted. *I cannot*

understand how he can be living. Has Cannonby told you whence the error arose?"

She did not answer. She began to tremble again; she tossed back her golden hair. Blue ribbons had been wreathed in it for dinner: she pulled them out and threw them on the ground, her hair partially falling with their unloosening.

"I wish I could have some wine."

He moved to the door to get it for her. "Don't let *her* in, Lionel," she called out as he unlocked it.

"Who?"

"Deborah. I hate her now," was the ungenerous remark.

Lionel opened the door, called to Tynn, and desired him to bring wine. "What time did Captain Cannonby get here?" he whispered, as he took it from the butler.

"Who, sir?" asked Tynn.

"Captain Cannonby."

Tynn paused, as one who does not understand. "There's no one here of that name, sir. A Mr. Rushworth called to-day, and my mistress asked him to stay dinner. He is in the drawing-room now. No other stranger."

"Has Captain Cannonby not been at all?" reiterated Lionel. "He left London this morning to come here."

Tynn shook his head. "He has not arrived, sir."

Lionel went in again, his feelings undergoing a sort of revulsion, for there now peeped out a glimmer of hope. So long as the almost certain conviction on Lionel's mind was not confirmed by positive testimony—as he expected Captain Cannonby's would be—he could not lose sight of all hope. That he most fervently prayed the blow might not fall, might even now be averted, you will readily believe. Sibylla had not been to him the wife he had fondly hoped for; she provoked him every hour in the day; she appeared to do what she could wilfully to estrange his affection. He was conscious of all this; he was all too conscious that his inmost love was another's not hers: but he lost sight of himself in his anxiety for her: it was for her sake that he prayed and hoped. Whether she was his wife by law, or not; whether she was loved or hated, Lionel's duty lay plain before him now: to shield her, so far as he might be allowed, in all care and tenderness. He would have shed his last drop of blood to promote her comfort; he would have sacrificed every feeling of his heart for her sake.

The wine in his hand, he turned into the room again. A change had taken place in her aspect. She had left the chair, and was standing against the wall opposite the door, her tears dried, her eyes unnaturally bright, her cheeks burning.

"Lionel," she uttered, her hurried breath betraying her emotion, "if *he* is alive, whose is Verner's Pride?"

"His," replied Lionel, in a low tone.

She exclaimed, very much after the manner of a petulant child. "I won't leave it!—I won't leave Verner's Pride! You could not be so cruel as to wish me to do so. Who says he is alive? Lionel, I ask you who it is that says he is alive?"

"Hush, my dear! This excitement will do you a world of harm, and it cannot mend the matter, however it may be. I want to know who told you of this, Sibylla. I supposed it to be Cannonby: but Tynn says Cannonby has not been here."

The question appeared to divert her thoughts into another channel. "Cannonby! What should bring him here? Did you expect him?"

"Drink your wine, and then I will tell you," he said, holding the glass towards her.

She pushed the wine from her capriciously. "I don't want wine now. I am hot. I should like some water."

"I will get it for you directly. Tell me, first of all, how you came to know of this?"

"Deborah told me. She sent for me out of the drawing-room, where I was so happy, to tell me this horrid tale. Lionel"—sinking her voice again to a whisper—"is—he—here?"

"I cannot tell you——"

"But you must tell me," she passionately interrupted. "I will know. I have a right to know it, Lionel."

"When I say I cannot tell you, Sibylla, I mean that I cannot do so with certainty. I will tell you all I do know. Some one is in the neighbourhood who bears a great resemblance to him. He is seen sometimes at night: and—and—I have other testimony that he has returned from Australia."

"What will be done if he comes here?"

Lionel was silent.

"Shall you fight him?"

"Fight him!" echoed Lionel. "No."

"You will give up Verner's Pride without a struggle! You will give up me! Then you are a coward, Lionel Verner!"

"You know that I would willingly give up neither, Sibylla."

Grievously pained was his tone as he replied to her. She was meeting this as she did most other things—without sense or reason; not as a thinking, rational being. Her manner was loud, her emotion violent: but, deep and true, her grief was *not*. Depth of feeling, truth of nature, were qualities that never yet had place in Sibylla Verner. Not once throughout all their married life had Lionel been so painfully impressed with the fact as he was now.

"Am I to die for want of that water?" she resumed. "If you don't get it for me, I shall ring for the servants to bring it."

He opened the door again without a word. He knew quite well that she had thrown in that little shaft about ringing for the servants, because it would not be pleasant to him that the servants should intrude upon them. Outside the door, about to knock at it, was Deborah West.

"I must go home," she whispered. "Mr. Verner, how sadly she is meeting this!"

The very thought that was in Lionel's heart. But not to another would he cast a shadow of reflection on his wife.

"It is a terrible thing for any one to meet," he answered. "I could have wished, Miss West, that you had not imparted it to her. Better that I should have done it, when it must have been done."

"I did it from a good motive," was the reply of Deborah, who was looking very down-hearted, and had evidently been crying. "She ought to leave you until some certainty shall be arrived at."

"Nonsense! No!" said Lionel. "I beg you—I *beg* you, Miss West, not to say anything more that can distress or disturb her. If the—the—explosion comes, of course it must come; and we must all meet it as we best may, and then see what is best to be done."

"But it is not right that she should remain with you in this uncertainty," urged Deborah, who could be obstinate when she thought she had reason on her side. "The world will not deem it right. You should remember this."

"I do not act to please the world. I am responsible to God and my conscience."

"Responsible to—— Good gracious, Mr. Verner!" returned Deborah, every line in her face expressing astonishment. "You call keeping her with you acting as a responsible man ought to act? If Sibylla's husband is living, you must put her away from your side."

"When the time shall come. Until then, my duty—as I judge it—is to keep her by my side; to shelter her from harm and annoyance, small as well as great."

"You deem *that* your duty?"

"I do," he firmly answered. "My duty to her and to God."

Deborah shook her head and her hands. "It ought not to be allowed to go on," she said, moving nearer to the study-door. "I shall urge the leaving you upon her."

Lionel calmly laid his hand upon the lock. "Pardon me, Miss West. I cannot allow my wife to be subjected to it."

"But if she is not your wife?"

The scarlet came into his pale face. "It has yet to be proved that she is not. Until that time shall come, Miss West, she *is* my wife, and I shall protect her as such."

"You will not let me see her?" asked Deborah, for his hand was not lifted from the handle.

"No. Not if your motives be what you avow. Sleep a night upon it, Miss West, and see if you do not change your way of thinking and come over to mine. Return here in the morning with words of love and comfort for her, and none will welcome you more sincerely than I."

"Answer me one thing, Mr. Verner. Do you believe in your heart that Frederick Massingbird is alive and has returned?"

"Unfortunately I have no choice but to believe it," he replied.

"Then, to your way of thinking, I can never come," returned Deborah in some agitation. "It is just sin, Mr. Verner, in the sight of Heaven."

"I think not," he quietly answered. "I am content to let Heaven judge me and the motives that actuate me: a judgment more merciful than man's."

Deborah West, in her conscientious, but severe rectitude, turned to the hall door and departed. Lionel ordered Tynn to attend Miss West home. He then procured some water for his wife and carried it in, as he had previously carried in the wine.

A fruitless service. Sibylla rejected it. She wanted neither water nor anything else, were all the thanks Lionel received, querulously spoken. He put the glass upon the table: and, sitting down by her side in all patience, set himself to the work of soothing her, gently and lovingly as though she had been what she was showing herself—a wayward child.

Miss West and Tynn proceeded on their way. The path was dirty, and she chose the middle of the road, Tynn walking a step behind her. Deborah was affable by nature, Tynn a long-attached and valued servant, and she chatted with him familiarly. Thus they progressed towards the village, utterly unconscious that a pair of eager eyes were following and an evil tongue was casting anathemas towards them.

The owner of the eyes and tongue was wanting to hold a few private words with Tynn. Could Tynn have seen round the corner of the outer gate when he went out, he would have detected the man waiting in ambush. It was Giles Roy. Roy was aware that Tynn sometimes attended departing visitors as far as the outer gate. Roy had come up, hoping that he might so attend them to-night. Tynn did appear, with Miss West, and Roy began to hug himself that fortune had so far favoured him: but when he saw that Tynn departed with the lady, instead of only standing politely to watch her off, Roy growled out vengeance against the unconscious offenders.

"He's going to see her home belike," snarled Roy, following them

with angry eyes and slow footsteps. "I must wait till he comes back—and be shot to both of 'em!"

Tynn left Miss West at her own door, declining the invitation to go in and take a bit of supper with the maids, or a glass of beer. He was trudging back again, his arms behind his back and wishing himself at home, for Tynn, fat and of short breath, did not like walking, when in a lonely part of the road, he came upon a man astride upon a gate.

"Halloa! is that you, Mr. Tynn? Who'd ha' thought of seeing you out to-night?"

For it was Mr. Roy's wish, from motives of his own, that Tynn should not know he had been looked for, but should believe the encounter to be accidental. Tynn turned off the road, and leaned his elbow upon the gate, rather glad of the opportunity to stand a minute and recover breath. It was somewhat up-hill to Verner's Pride the whole way from Deerham.

"Are you sitting here for pleasure?" asked he of Roy.

"I'm sitting here for grief," returned Roy; and Tynn was not sharp enough to detect the falseness of his tone. "I had to go up the road to-night on a matter of business, and, walking back by Verner's Pride, it so overcome me that I was glad to bring myself to an anchor."

"How should walking by Verner's Pride overcome you?" demanded Tynn.

"Well," said Roy, "it was the thoughts of poor Mr. and Mrs. Verner did it. He didn't behave to me over-liberal in turning me from the place I'd held so long under his uncle, but I've got over that smart; it's past and gone. My heart bleeds for him now, and that's the truth."

For Roy's heart to "bleed" for any fellow-creature was a marvel that even Tynn, unsuspicious as he was, could not take in. Mrs. Tynn repeatedly assured him that he had been born into the world with one sole quality—credulity. Certainly Tynn was unusually inclined to put faith in fair outsides. Not that Roy could boast much of the latter advantage.

"What's the matter with Mr. Verner?" he asked of Roy.

Roy groaned dismally. "It's a thing that has come to my knowledge," said he—"an awful misfortune that is going to drop upon him. I'd not say a word to another soul but you, Mr. Tynn; but you're his friend if anybody be, and I feel that I must either speak or bust."

Tynn peered at Roy's face. As much as he could see of it, for the night was not a very clear one.

"It seems quite a providence that I happened to meet you," went on Roy, as if any meeting with the butler had been as far from his

thoughts as an encounter with somebody at the North Pole. "Things does turn out lucky sometimes."

"I must be getting home," interposed Tynn. "If you have anything to say to me, Roy, you had better say it. I may be wanted."

Roy—who was standing now, his elbow on the gate—brought his face nearer to Tynn's. Tynn was also leaning on the gate.

"Have you heard of this ghost that's said to be walking about Deerham?" he asked, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Have you heard whose they say it is?"

Now, Tynn had heard. All the retainers, male and female, at Verner's Pride had heard. And Tynn, though not much inclined to give credence to ghosts in a general way, had felt somewhat uneasy at the tale. More on his mistress's account than for any other reason: for Tynn had the sense to know that such a report could not be pleasing to Mrs. Verner, should it reach her ears.

"I can't think why they do say it," replied Tynn, answering the man's concluding question. "For my own part, I don't believe there's anything in it. I don't believe in ghosts."

"Neither didn't a good many more, till now that they have got demonstration of it," returned Roy. "Dan Duff saw it, and a'most lost his senses; that girl of Hook's saw it, and you know, I suppose, what it did for *her;* Broom saw it: the parson saw it; old Frost saw it; and lots more. Not one of 'em but would take their Bible oath, if put to it, that it is Fred Massingbird's ghost."

"But it is not," said Tynn. "It can't be. Leastways I'll never believe it till I see it with my own eyes. There'd be no reason in it's coming now. If it had wanted to come at all, why didn't it come when it was first buried, and not wait till over two years had gone by?"

"That's the point that I stuck at," was Roy's answer. "When my wife came home with the tales, day after day, that Fred Massingbird's spirit was walking,—that this person had seen it, and that person had seen it—'Rubbish!' I says to her. 'If his ghost had been coming, it would ha' come before now.' And so it would."

"Of course," answered Tynn. "*If* it had been coming. But I have not lived to these years to believe in ghosts at last."

"Then, what do you think of the parson, Mr. Tynn?" continued Roy, significantly. "And Broom,—he has got his senses about him? How do you account for their believing it?"

"I have not heard them say that they do believe it," responded Tynn, with a knowing nod. "Folks may go about and say that I believe it, perhaps; but that wouldn't make it nearer the fact. And what has all this to do with Mr. Verner?"

"I am coming to it," said Roy. He took a step backward, looked carefully up and down the road, lest listeners might be in ambush; stretched his neck forward, and surveyed the field on either side the hedge. Apparently it satisfied him, and he resumed his position and his meaning whisper. "Can't you guess the riddle, Mr. Tynn?"

"I can't in the least guess what you mean, or what you are driving at," was Tynn's response. "I think you must have been having a drop of drink, Roy. I ask what this is to my master, Mr. Verner?"

"I've not had a sup inside my mouth since midday," was Roy's retort. "This secret has been enough drink for me, and meat, too. You'll keep counsel, if I tell it you, Mr. Tynn? Not but what it must soon come out."

"Well?" returned Tynn, in some surprise.

"It's Fred Massingbird fast enough. But it's not his ghost."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Tynn, never for a moment glancing at the fact Roy hinted at.

"*He* is come back: Frederick Massingbird. He didn't die, over there."

A pause, devoted by Tynn to staring and thinking. When the full sense of the words broke upon him, he staggered a step or two away from the ex-bailiff.

"Heaven help us, if it's true!" he uttered. "Roy, it *can't* be!"

"It *is*," said Roy.

They stood looking at each other in the starlight. Tynn's face had grown hot, and he wiped it. "It can't be," he mechanically repeated.

"I tell you it *is*, Mr. Tynn. Now, never you mind asking me how I came to the bottom of it," went on Roy defiantly. "I did come to the bottom of it, and I do know it; and Mr. Fred, he knows that I know it. It's as sure that he is back, and in the neighbourhood, as that you and me are here at this gate. He is alive and he is among us."

There came flashing over Tynn's thoughts the scene of that very evening. His mistress's agitation when she broke from Miss West; the sounds which had penetrated to their ears when she was afterwards shut in the study with her husband. The unusual scene had been productive of gossip amongst the servants: and Tynn had believed something distressing must have occurred. Not this; he had never glanced at suspicion of this. He remembered the lines of pain which shone out at the moment from his master's pale face, in spite of its impassiveness; and somehow that very face brought conviction to Tynn now, that Roy's news was true. Tynn let his arms fall on the gate again with a groan.

"Whatever will become of my poor mistress?" he uttered.

"She!" slightingly returned Roy. "She'll be better off than him."

"Better off than who?"

"Than Mr. Verner. She needn't leave Verner's Pride. He must."

To expect any but coarse ideas from Roy, Tynn could not. But his attention was caught by the last suggestion.

"Leave Verner's Pride?" slowly repeated Tynn. "Must he?—good Heavens! must my master be turned from Verner's Pride?"

"Where'll be the help for it?" asked Roy, confidentially. "I tell you, Mr. Tynn, my heart's been bleeding for him ever since I heard it. *I* don't see any help for his turning out. I have been a-weighing it over and over in my mind, and I don't see none. Do you?"

Tynn looked very blank. He felt so. He made no answer, and Roy continued, still blandly confidential.

"If that there codicil, that was so much talked on hadn't been lost, he'd have been all right, would Mr. Verner. No come-to-life-again Fred Massingbird need have tried to turn him out. Couldn't it be hunted for again, Mr. Tynn?"

Roy turned the tail of his eye on Tynn. Would his pumping take effect? Mrs. Tynn would have told him that her husband might be pumped dry, and never know it. She was not far wrong. Unsuspicious Tynn fell headlong into the snare.

"Where would be the good of hunting for it again—when every conceivable place was hunted for it before?" he asked.

"Well, it was a curious thing, that codicil," remarked Roy. "Has it *never* been heard of?"

Tynn shook his head. "Never at all. What an awful thing this is, if it's true!"

"It is true, I tell ye," said Roy. "You needn't doubt it. There was a report a short time ago that the codicil had been found, and Matiss had it in safe keeping. As I sat here, before you come up, I was thinking how well it would have served Mr. Verner's turn just now, if it *was* true."

"It is not true," said Tynn. "All sorts of reports get about. The codicil has never been found and never been heard of."

"What a pity!" groaned Roy, with a deep sigh. "I'm glad I've told you, Mr. Tynn! It's a heavy secret for a man to carry about with him. I must be going."

"So must I," said Tynn. "Roy, are you sure there's no mistake?" he added. "It seems a tale next to impossible."

"Well now," said Roy, "I see you don't half believe me. You must wait a few days, and see what those days 'll bring forth. That Mr. Massingbird's back from Australia, I'll take my oath to. *I*

didn't believe it at first; and when young Duff was going on about the porkypine, I shook him for a little lying rascal. I know better now."

"But how do you know it?" debated Tynn.

"Never you mind. It's my business, I say, and nobody else's. You just wait a day or two, that's all, Mr. Tynn. I declare I am as glad to have met with you to-night, and exchanged these opinions, as if anybody had counted me out a bag o' gold."

"Well, good night, Roy," concluded Tynn, turning his steps towards Verner's Pride. "I wish I had been a hundred miles off, I know, before I had heard it."

Roy slipped over the gate; and there, out of sight, he executed a kind of triumphant dance.

"Then there is no codicil!" cried he. "I thought I could wile it out of him! That Tynn's as easy to run out as glass when it's hot."

And, putting his best leg forward, he made his way as fast as he could towards home.

Tynn made *his* way towards Verner's Pride. But not so fast. The information he had received filled his mind with the saddest trouble, and caused his steps to linger. When any great calamity falls suddenly upon us, or the dread of any great calamity, our first natural thought is, how it may be mitigated or averted. It was the thought that occurred to Tynn. The first shock over, digested, as may be said, Tynn began to deliberate whether he could do anything to help his master in the strait; and he went along, turning all sorts of suggestions over in his mind. Much as Sibylla was disliked by the old servants—and she had contrived to make herself very much disliked by them all—Tynn could not help feeling sharply the blow that was about to burst upon her head. Was there anything earthly he could do to avert it?—to help her or his master?

He did not doubt the information. Roy was not a particularly reliable person; but Tynn could not doubt that this was true. It was the most feasible solution to the ghost story agitating Deerham; the only solution, Tynn grew to think. If Frederick Massingbird——

Tynn's reflections came to a halt. Vaulting over a gate on the other side the road—the very gate through which poor Rachel Frost had glided the night of her death, to avoid meeting Frederick Massingbird and Sibylla West—was a tall man. He came straight across the road, in front of Tynn, and passed through a gap of the hedge, on to the grounds of Verner's Pride.

But what made Tynn stand transfixed, as if he had been changed into a statue? What brought a cold chill to his heart, a heat to his

brow? Why, as the man passed him, he turned his face full on Tynn; disclosing the features, the white, whiskerless cheek, with the black mark upon it, of Frederick Massingbird. Recovering himself as he best could, Tynn walked on, and gained the house.

Mrs. Verner had gone to her room. Mr. Verner was mixing with his guests. Some of the gentlemen were on the terrace smoking, and Tynn made his way to it, hoping he might get a minute's interview with his master. The impression upon Tynn's mind was, that Frederick Massingbird was coming there and then, to invade Verner's Pride. It appeared to Tynn to be his duty to impart what he had heard and seen at once to Mr. Verner.

Circumstances favoured him. Lionel had been talking with Mr. Gordon at the far end of the terrace, but the latter was called from the drawing-room windows and departed in answer to it. Tynn seized the opportunity: his master was alone.

Quite alone. He was leaning over the outer balustrade of the terrace, apparently looking forth in the night obscurity on his own lands, stretched out before him. "Sir!" whispered Tynn, forgetting ceremony in the moment's absorbing agitation, in the terrible calamity that was about to fall, "I have had an awful secret made known to me to-night. I must tell it you, sir."

"I know it already, Tynn," was the quiet response of Lionel.

Then Tynn told all he had heard, and how he had heard it; how he had just *seen* Frederick Massingbird. Lionel started from the balustrade.

"Tynn! You saw him! Now?"

"Not five minutes ago, sir. He came right on to these grounds through the gap in the hedge. Oh, sir! what will be done?" and the man's voice rose in its anguish. "He may be coming on now to put in his claim to Verner's Pride; to—to—to all that's in it!"

But that Lionel was nerved to self-control, he might have answered with emotion. His mind filled up the words, that Tynn's delicacy would not speak. "He may be coming to claim Sibylla."

CHAPTER LV.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE WORST.

THE night passed quietly at Verner's Pride. Not, for all its inmates, pleasantly. Faithful Tynn bolted and barred the doors and windows with his own hand, as he might have done in anticipation of a burglar. He then took up his station to watch the approaches to the house, and never stirred until the morning. There may have run through Tynn's mind some vague fear of violence, should his

master and Frederick Massingbird come into contact with each other.

How did Lionel pass it? Wakeful and watchful as Tynn. He went to bed; but sleep, for him, there was none. His wife, by his side, slept all through the night. Better, of course, for her, that it should be so: but, that her frame of mind could be sufficiently easy to admit of sleep, was a perfect marvel to Lionel. Had he needed proof to convince him how shallow was her mind, how incapable she was of depth of feeling, of thought, this would have supplied it. She slept throughout the night. Lionel never closed his eyes: his brain was at work, his mind was troubled, his heart was aching. Not for himself. His position was certainly not one to be envied: but, in his great anxiety for his wife, self passed out of sight. To what conflict might she not be about to be exposed? to what unseemly struggle, outward and inward, might she not expose herself? He knew quite well that, according to the laws of God and man, she was Frederick Massingbird's wife; not his. He should never think—when the time came—of disputing Frederick Massingbird's claim to her. But, what would she do?—how would she act? He believed in his honest heart, that Sibylla (in spite of her aggravating ways toward him, and whatever might have been her preference for Frederick Massingbird in the earlier days) cared most for him, Lionel, now. He believed that she would not willingly return to Frederick Massingbird. Or, if she did, it would be for the sake of Verner's Pride.

He was right. Heartless, selfish, vain, and ambitious, Verner's Pride possessed far more attraction for Sibylla than did either Lionel or Frederick Massingbird. Allow her to keep quiet possession of that, and she would not give much thought to either of them. If the conflict actually came, Lionel felt, in his innate refinement, that the proper course for Sibylla to adopt would be to forego all social ties, partially to retire from the world—as Miss West had suggested she should do now in the uncertainty. His mind was made up on one point—to withdraw himself out of the way when that time came. To India, to the wilds of Africa—anywhere, far, far away. Never would he remain to be an eyesore to Sibylla or Frederick Massingbird,—inhabiting the land they inhabited, breathing the air that sustained life in them. Sibylla might rely on one thing—that when Frederick Massingbird did appear beyond doubt or dispute, that very hour he would say adieu to Sibylla. The shock soothed—and he would soothe it to her to the very utmost of his power—he should depart. He would be no more capable of retaining Sibylla in the face of her first husband, than he could have taken her, knowingly, from that husband in his lifetime.

But where *was* Frederick Massingbird? Tynn's opinion had been—he had told it to his master—that when he saw Frederick

Massingbird stealing into the grounds of Verner's Pride the previous evening, he was coming on to the house, there and then. Perhaps Lionel himself had entertained the same conviction. But the night had passed, and no Frederick Massingbird had appeared. What could be the meaning of it? What could be the meaning of his dodging about Deerham in this manner, frightening the inhabitants?—of his watching the windows of Verner's Pride? Verner's Pride was his; Sibylla was his; why, then, did he not openly assume his rightful position?

Lionel joined his guests at breakfast. His wife did not. With smiling lips and bland brow, he had to hide a mind full of intolerable suspense, an aching heart. A minor puzzle—though nothing compared with the puzzle touching the movements of Frederick Massingbird—was working within him, as to the movements of Captain Cannonby. What could have become of that gentleman? Where could he be halting on his journey? Had his halt anything to do with this grievous business?

To Lionel's great surprise, just as they were concluding breakfast, he saw the close carriage driven to the door, attended by Wigham and Bennet. You may remember the latter name. Master Dan Duff had called him "Calves" to Mr. Verner. If Verner's Pride could not keep its masters, it kept its servants. Lionel went out, and saw his wife descending the stairs, dressed. "Are you going out?" he cried, his voice betokening surprise.

"I can't be worried with this uncertainty," was Sibylla's answer, spoken anything but courteously. "I am going to make Deborah tell me all she knows, and where she heard it."

"But——"

"I won't be dictated to, Lionel," she querulously stopped him with. "I will go. What is it to you?"

He turned without a remonstrance, and attended her to the carriage, placing her in it as considerately as though she had met him with a wife's loving words. When she was seated, he leaned towards her. "Would you like me to accompany you, Sibylla?"

"I don't care about it."

He closed the door in silence, his lips compressed. There were times when her fitful moods vexed him intolerably. This was one of them. When they knew not but the passing hour might be the last of their union, the last they should ever spend together, it was scarcely seemly to mar its harmony with ill-temper. At least, so felt Lionel. Sibylla spoke as he was turning away.

"Of course, I thought you would go with me. I did not expect you would grumble at me for going."

"Get my hat, Bennet," he said. And he stepped in and took his seat beside her.

Courteous and smiling, as though not a shade of care were within ages of him, Lionel bowed to his guests as the carriage passed the breakfast-room windows. He saw that curious faces were directed to him; he felt that wondering comments, as to their early and sudden drive, were being spoken; he knew that the scene of the past evening was affording food for speculation. He could not help it; these minor annoyances were as nothing, compared with the great trouble that absorbed him. The windows passed, he turned to his wife.

"I have neither grumbled at you for going, Sibylla, nor do I see cause for grumbling. Why should you charge me with it?"

"There! you are going to find fault with me again! Why are you so cross?"

Cross! He cross? Lionel suppressed at once the retort that was rising to his lips; as he had done hundreds of times before.

"Heaven knows, nothing was farther from my thoughts than to be 'cross,'" he answered in tones full of pain. "Were I to be cross to you, Sibylla, in—in—what may be our last hour together, I should reflect upon myself for my whole after-life."

"It is not our last hour together!" she vehemently answered. "Who says it is?"

"I trust it is not. But I cannot conceal from myself the fact that it may be so. Remember," he added, turning to her with a sudden impulse, and clasping both her hands in a firm, impressive grasp—"remember that my whole life, since you became mine, has been spent for you: in promoting your happiness: in striving to give you more love than has been given to me. I have never met you with an unkind word; I have never given you a clouded look. You will think of this when we are separated. And, for myself, its remembrance will be as balm to my conscience."

Dropping her hands, he drew back to his corner of the chariot, his head reclining against the white watered silk, as if heavy with weariness. In truth, it was so: heavy with the weariness caused by care. He had spoken all too impulsively: the avowal was wrung from him in the moment's bitter strife. A balm to his conscience that he had done his duty by her in love? Ay. For the love of his inmost heart had been another's—not hers.

Sibylla did not understand the allusion. It was well. In her weak and trifling manner, she was subsiding into tears, when the carriage suddenly stopped. Lionel, his thoughts never free, since a day or two, of Frederick Massingbird, looked up with a start, almost expecting to see him.

Lady Verner's groom had been galloping on horseback to Verner's Pride. Seeing Mr. Verner's carriage, and he within it, he had made a sign to Wigham, who drew up. The man rode up to the window, a note in hand.

"Miss Verner charged me to lose no time in delivering it to you, sir. She said it was immediate. I shouldn't else have presumed to stop your carriage."

He backed his horse a step or two, waiting for an answer, should there be any. Lionel ran his eyes over the contents of the note.

"Tell Miss Verner I will call upon her shortly, Philip."

And the man, touching his hat, turned his horse, and galloped back towards Deerham Court.

"What does she want? What is it?" impatiently asked Sibylla.

"My mother wishes to see me," replied Lionel.

"And what else? I know *that's* not all," reiterated Sibylla, her tones resentful. "You have always secrets at Deerham Court from me."

"Never in my life," he answered. "You can read the note, Sibylla."

She took it up, devouring its few lines rapidly. Lionel believed it must be the doubt and uncertainty that were rendering her so irritable: in his heart he felt inclined to make every allowance for her; more perhaps than she deserved. There were only a few lines:

"Do come to us at once, my dear Lionel! A most strange report has reached us, and mamma is as one bereft of her senses. She wants you here to contradict it: she says, she knows it cannot have any foundation. "DECIMA."

Somehow the words seemed to subdue Sibylla's irritation. She returned the note to Lionel, and spoke in hushed tones. "Is it *this* report that she alludes to, do you think, Lionel?"

"I fear so. I do not know what other it can be. I am vexed that it should already have reached the ears of my mother."

"Of course!" resentfully spoke Sibylla. "You would have spared *her!*"

"I would have spared my mother, had it been in my power. I would have spared my wife," he added, bending his grave, kind face towards her, "that, and all other ill."

She dashed down the front blinds of the carriage, and laid her head upon his bosom, sobbing repentantly.

"You would bear with me, Lionel, if you knew the pain I have here"—touching her chest. "I am sick and ill with fright."

He did not answer that he *did* bear with her, bear with her most patiently—as he might have done. He only placed his arm round her that she might feel its shelter: and, with his gentle fingers, pushed the golden curls away from her face.

She went into her sister's house alone. She preferred to do so.

The carriage took Lionel on to Deerham Court. He dismissed it when he alighted; ordering Wigham back to Miss West's, to await the pleasure of his mistress.

No one was in the breakfast-room but Lucy Tempest. By the very way in which she looked at him—the flushed cheeks, the eager eyes—he saw that the tidings had reached her. She timidly held out her hand to him, her anxious gaze meeting his. Whatever may have been the depth of feeling entertained for him, Lucy was too single-minded not to express all the sympathy she felt.

"Is it true?" were her first whispered words, offering no other salutation.

"Is what true, Lucy?" he asked. "How am I to know what you mean?"

They stood looking at each other. Lionel waiting for her to speak; she hesitating. Until Lionel was perfectly certain that she alluded to that particular report, he would not speak of it. Lucy moved a few steps from him, and stood nervously playing with the ends of her waistband.

"I do not like to tell you," she said simply. "It would not be a pleasant thing for you to hear, if it is not true."

"And still less pleasant for me, if it be true," he replied, the words bringing him conviction that the rumour they had heard was no other. "I fear it is true, Lucy."

"That—some one—has come back?"

"Some one who was supposed to be dead."

The avowal seemed to take from her all hope. Her hands fell listlessly, and the tears rose to her eyes. "I am so sorry!" she breathed. "I am so sorry for you, and for—for——"

"My wife. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes. I did not much like to say it. I am truly grieved. I wish I could have helped it!"

"Ah! you are not a fairy with a magic wand yet, Lucy, such as we read of in children's books. It is a terrible blow, for her and for me. Do you know how the rumour reached my mother?"

"I think it was through the servants. Some of them heard it, and old Catherine told her. Lady Verner has been like any one wild ever since; but for Decima, she would have started——"

Lucy's voice died away. Gliding in at the door, with a white face and drawn lips, was Lady Verner. She grasped Lionel, her eyes searching his countenance for confirmation of her fears, or contradiction. Lionel took her hands in his.

"It is true, mother. Be brave for my sake."

With a cry she sank on the sofa, drawing him beside her. Decima entered and stood before them, her hands clasped in pain.

Lady Verner made him tell her all the particulars: all he knew, all he feared.

"How does Sibylla meet it?" was her first question when she had listened to the end.

"Not very well," he answered, after a momentary hesitation. "Who could meet it well?"

"Lionel, it is a judgment upon her. She——"

Lionel started up, his brow flushing.

"I beg your pardon, mother. You forget that you are speaking of my wife. She *is* my wife," he more calmly added, "until she shall have been proved not to be so."

No. Whatever may have been Sibylla's conduct to him personally, neither before her face nor behind her back, would Lionel forget one jot of the respect due to her. Or suffer another to forget it; although that other should be his mother.

"What shall you do with her, Lionel?"

"Do with her?" he repeated, not understanding how to take the question.

"When the man makes himself known?"

"I am content to leave that to the time," replied Lionel, in tones that debarred further discussion.

"I knew no good would come of it," resumed Lady Verner, persistent in expressing her opinion. "But for the wiles of that girl, you might have married happily, might have married Mary Elmsley."

"Mother, there is trouble enough upon us just now without introducing old vexations," rejoined Lionel. "I have told you before, that, under any circumstances, Lady Mary would never have been my wife."

"If he comes back, he comes back to Verner's Pride?" pursued Lady Verner, in low tones, breaking the pause which had ensued.

"Yes. Verner's Pride is his."

"And what shall you do? Turned like a beggar, out on the face of the earth?"

Like a beggar? Ay, far more like a beggar than Lady Verner, in her worst apprehension, could picture.

"I must make my way on the earth as I best can," he replied in answer. "I shall leave Europe. Probably for India. I may find some means, through my late father's friends, of earning my bread there."

Lady Verner appeared to appreciate the motive which no doubt dictated the suggested course. She did not attempt to controvert it; she only wrung her hands in passionate vexation.

"Oh, that you had not married her; that you had not subjected yourself to this dreadful blight!"

Lionel rose. There were limits of endurance even for his aching heart. Reproaches in a moment of trouble are as iron entering the soul.

"I will come in another time when you are more yourself, mother," was all he said. "I could have borne sympathy from you, this morning, better than complaint." He went out, and was half-way across the ante-room, when he heard hasty footsteps behind him. He turned to see Lucy Tempest, her hands extended, her tears streaming.

"Oh, Lionel, please not to go away thinking no one sympathizes with you! I am so grieved: so sorry! If I can do anything for you, or for Sibylla, to lighten the distress, I will do it."

He took the pretty, pleading hands in his, bending his face until it was nearly on a level with hers. But that emotion nearly overmastered him in the moment's anguish, the very consciousness that he might be free from married obligations, would have rendered his manner cold to Lucy Tempest. Whether Frederick Massingbird were alive or not, *he* must be a man isolated from other wedded ties, so long as Sibylla remained on earth. The kind young face, held up to him in its grief, disarmed his reserve. He spoke out to Lucy as freely as he had done in that long past illness, when she was his confidant. Nay, whether from her looks, or from some lately sleeping chord in his memory reawakened, that past time was before him now, rather than the present. His next words proved it.

"Lucy, with one thing and another, my heart is half broken. I wish I had died in that illness. Better for me! Better—perhaps—for you."

"Not for me," said she, through her tears. "Do not think of me. I wish I could help you in this great sorrow!"

"Help from you of any sort, Lucy, I forfeited in my blind wilfulness," he hoarsely whispered. "God bless you!" he added, wringing her hands to pain. "God bless you for ever!"

She did not loose them. He was about to draw his hands away, but she held them still, her tears and sobs overcoming her.

"You spoke of India. Should it be that land that you choose for your exile, go to papa. He may be able to do great things for you. And, if in his power, he *would* do them, for Sir Lionel Verner's sake. Papa longs to know you. He always says so much about you in his letters to me."

"You have never told me so, Lucy."

"I thought it better not to talk to you too much," she simply said. "And you have not been always at Deerham."

Lionel looked at her, holding her hands still. She knew how futile it was to affect ignorance of truths in that moment of unre-

serve; she knew that her mind and its feelings were as clear to Lionel as though she had been transparent, and she spoke freely in her simplicity. She knew—probably—that his deepest love and esteem were given to her. Lionel knew it, if she did not; knew it to his very heart's core. He could only reiterate his prayer, as he finally turned from her.

"God bless you, Lucy, for ever and for ever!"

He went out; and in passing the Golden Fleece, John Cox, its landlord, was standing at the door, apparently pointing out the road to a strange gentleman beside him.

"Go as straight as you can, sir, through the village and for a goodish distance beyond it," he was saying, as Lionel drew within hearing. "It will bring you to Verner's Pride. You can't mistake it: it's the only mansion thereabouts."

The words caused Lionel to give a rapid glance to the stranger. He saw a man of some five-and-thirty or forty years, of fair complexion once, but bronzed now by travel, or other causes. The landlord's eyes fell on Lionel.

"Here is Mr. Verner!" he hastily exclaimed. "Sir,"—saluting Lionel—"this gentleman was going up to you at Verner's Pride."

The stranger turned, holding out his hand in a free and pleasant way to Lionel. "My name is Cannonby."

"I could have known it by the likeness to your brother," said Lionel, shaking hands with him. "I saw him yesterday. I was in town, and he told me you were coming down. But why were you not with us last night?"

"I turned aside on my journey to look up an old military friend—whom, by the way, I found to be out—and did not reach Deerham until past ten," explained Captain Cannonby. "I thought it too late to invade you, so put up here until this morning."

Lionel linked his arm within Captain Cannonby's, and drew him onwards. The moment of confirmation had come. His mind was in too sad a state to allow of his beating about the bush: his suspense had been too sharp and urgent for him to prolong it now. He plunged into the matter at once.

"You have come to bring me some unpleasant news, Captain Cannonby. Unhappily, it will be news no longer. But you will give me the exact particulars."

Captain Cannoby looked as if he did not understand. "Unpleasant news?" he repeated.

"I speak"—and Lionel lowered his voice—"of Frederick Massingbird. You know, probably, what I would ask. How long have you been cognizant of these unhappy facts?"

"I declare, Mr. Verner, I don't know what you mean," was Captain Cannonby's answer, given heartily. "To what do you allude?"

Lionel paused. Was it possible that he—Captain Cannonby—was in ignorance of the matter? "Tell me one thing," he said. "Your brother mentioned that you had heard, as he believed, some news connected with me and—and my wife in Paris, which had caused you to hurry home, and come down to Verner's Pride. What was that news?"

"The news I heard was, that Mrs. Massingbird had become Mrs. Verner. I had intended to find her out when I reached Europe, if only to apologize for my negligence in not giving her news of John Massingbird or his property—news I could never gather for myself—but I did not know precisely where she might be. I heard in Paris that she had married you, and was living at Verner's Pride."

Lionel drew a long breath. "And that was all?"

"That was all."

Then he was in ignorance of the truth! But, to keep him in ignorance was impossible. Lionel must ask for confirmation of the death. With low voice and rapid speech he mentioned the fears and the facts. Captain Cannonby gathered them in, withdrew his arm from Lionel's, and stood staring at him.

"Fred Massingbird alive, and come back to England!" he uttered in bewildered wonder.

"We cannot think otherwise," replied Lionel.

"Then, Mr. Verner, I tell you that it cannot be. It *cannot* be, you understand. I saw him die. I saw him laid in the grave."

They had not walked on. They stood there, looking at each other, absorbed in themselves, oblivious to any attention that might be given to them by stray passers-by.

"I would give all my future life to believe you," earnestly spoke Lionel; "to believe that there can be no mistake. For my wife's sake."

"There is no mistake," reiterated Captain Cannonby. "I saw him dead; I saw him buried. A parson, in the company halting there, read the burial-service over him."

"You may have buried him, fancying he was dead," suggested Lionel, giving utterance to the wild thoughts of his imagination. "And—forgive me for bringing foward such pictures—the mistake may have been discovered in time—and——"

"It could not be," interrupted Captain Cannonby. "I am quite certain he was dead. Let us allow, if you will, for argument's sake, that he was not dead when he was put into the ground. Five minutes' lying there, with the weight of earth upon him, would have effectually destroyed life, had any been left in him. There was no coffin, you must remember."

"No?"

"People going to the gold-fields don't carry a supply of coffins

with them. If death occurs *en route*, it has to be provided for in the simplest and most practical manner. At least, I can answer that such was the case with regard to Fred Massingbird. He was buried in the clothes he wore when he died."

Lionel was lost in abstraction.

"He died at early dawn, just as the sun burst out to illumine the heavens, and at midday he was buried," continued Captain Cannonby. "I saw him buried. I saw the earth shovelled in upon him; nay, I helped to shovel it. I left him there; we all left him, covered over; at rest for good in this world. Mr. Verner, dismiss this fear; rely upon it that he was, and is, dead."

"I wish I could rely upon it!" spoke Lionel. "The fear, I may say the certainty, has been so unequivocally impressed upon me, that a doubt must remain until it is explained who walks about, bearing his outward appearance. He was a remarkable-looking man, you know. The black mark on his cheek alone would render him so."

"And that black mark is visible upon the cheek of the person who is seen at night?"

"Conspicuously so. This ghost—as it is taken for—has nearly frightened one or two lives away. It is very strange."

"Can it be any one got up to personate Fred Massingbird?"

"But to what purpose?" debated Lionel. "In all points this man bears the greatest resemblance to Frederick Massingbird—at least, if the eyes of those who have seen him may be trusted. My own butler saw him last night; the man passed close before him, turning his face upon him in the moment of passing. He says there can be no doubt that it is Frederick Massingbird."

Captain Cannonby felt a little staggered. "If it should turn out to be Frederick Massingbird, all I can say is, that I shall never believe any one's dead again. It will be more wonderful than an incident in a drama. I should next expect my old father to come to life, who has lain these twelve years past at Kensal Green Cemetery. Does Mrs. Verner know of this?"

"She does, unfortunately. She was told of it during my absence yesterday. I could have wished it kept from her, until we were at certainty about the matter."

"Oh, come, Mr. Verner, take heart!" impulsively cried Captain Cannonby, all the improbabilities of the case striking forcibly upon him. "The thing is not possible; it is not, indeed."

Sibylla had gone home, and they continued their way to Verner's Pride.

"Where is your luggage?" asked Lionel.

Captain Cannonby laughed. "Talk to a returned gold-digger of his 'luggage'! Mine consists of a hand portmanteau, and that is

at the Golden Fleece. I can order it up here, if you would like me to stay with you a few days. I should enjoy some shooting beyond everything."

"That is settled, then," said Lionel. "I will see that you have your portmanteau. Did you grow rich at the diggings?"

The captain shook his head. "I might have made something, had I stuck at it. But I grew sick of it altogether. My brother, the doctor, makes a heap of money, and I can get what I want from him," was the candid confession. "What a fine place!" exclaimed Captain Cannonby, bringing his steps to a halt as they came in view of Verner's Pride.

"Yes, it is. Not a pleasant prospect, was it, to contemplate being turned out of it by a dead man?"

"A dead—— You do not mean to say that Frederick Massingbird—if in life—would be owner of Verner's Pride?"

"Yes, he would be. I was its rightful heir, and why my uncle willed it away from me, to one who was not related to him, has remained a mystery to this day. Frederick Massingbird succeeded, to my exclusion. I only came into it at his death."

Captain Cannonby appeared thunderstruck at the revelation. "Why, then," he cried, after a pause, "this may supply the very motive-power that is wanting for one to personate Fred Massingbird."

"Scarcely," replied Lionel. "No ghost, or seeming ghost, walking about in secret at night, could get Verner's Pride resigned to him. He must come forward in the broad face of day, and establish his identity by indisputable proof."

"True, true. Well, it is a curious tale! I should like to witness the winding-up."

Lionel looked about for his wife. He could not find her. Very few of their guests were in the rooms; they had dispersed somewhere or other. He went up to Sibylla's dressing-room, but she was not there. Mademoiselle Benoite was coming along the corridor as he left it again.

"Do you know where your mistress is?" he asked.

"Mais certainement," responded mademoiselle. "Monsieur will find madame at the archerie."

He bent his steps to the targets. On the lawn, flitting amidst the other fair archers, in her green and gold dress, was Sibylla. All traces of care had vanished from her face, her voice was the merriest, her step the fleetest, her laugh the lightest. Truly, Lionel marvelled. There flashed into his mind the grieving face of another, whom he had not long ago parted from; grieving for their woes. Better for his mind's peace, that these contrasts had not been forced so continually upon him.

Could she, in some unaccountable manner have heard the consoling news that Cannonby brought with him? In the first moment, he thought it must be so: in the next, he knew it to be impossible. Smothering a sigh, he went forward, and drew her apart from the rest; choosing that covered walk where he had spoken to her a day or two before, about Mrs. Duff's bill. Taking her hands in his, he stood before her, looking with a reassuring smile into her face.

"What will you give me for some good news, Sibylla?"

"What about?" she rejoined.

"Need you ask? There is only one point upon which news could greatly interest either of us, just now. I have seen Cannonby. He is here, and——"

"Here! At Verner's Pride!" she interrupted. "Oh, I shall like to see Cannonby: to talk over old Australian times with him."

Who was to account for her capricious moods? Lionel remembered the evening, during the very moon not yet dark to the earth, when Sibylla had made a scene in the drawing-room, saying she could not bear to hear the name of Cannonby, or to be reminded of the past days in Melbourne. She was turning to fly to the house, but Lionel caught her.

"Wait, wait, Sibylla! Will you not hear the good tidings I have for you? Cannonby says there cannot be a doubt that Frederick Massingbird is dead. He left him dead and buried; as he told you in Melbourne. We have been terrified and pained—I trust—for nothing."

"Lionel, look here," said she, receiving the assurance in the same equable manner that she might have heard him assert it was a fine day, or a wet one: "I have been making up my mind not to let this bother worry me. That wretched old maid Deborah went on to me with such rubbish this morning about leaving you, about leaving Verner's Pride, that she vexed me to anger. I came home and cried; and Benoite found me lying upon the sofa; and when I told her what it was, she said, the best plan was, not to mind, to meet it with a laugh, instead of tears——"

"Sibylla!" he interposed, in a tone of pain. "You surely did not make a confidant of Benoite!"

"Of course I did," she answered, looking as if surprised at his question. "Why not? Benoite cheered me up, I can tell you, better than you do. 'What matter to cry?' she asked. 'If he does come back, you will still be the mistress of Verner's Pride.' And so I shall be."

Lionel released her hands. She sped off to the house, eager to find Captain Cannonby. He—her husband—leaned against a tree, bitter mortification in his face, bitter humiliation in his heart. Was

this the wife to whom he had bound himself for ever?' Well could he echo in that moment Lady Verner's reiterated assertion, that she was not worthy of him. With a stifled sigh that was more like a groan, he turned to follow her.

"Be still, be still!" he murmured, beating his hand upon his bosom, that he might still its pain. "Let me bear on, doing my duty by her always in love!"

That pretty Mrs. Jocelyn ran up to Lionel, and intercepted his path. Mrs. Jocelyn would have liked to intercept it more frequently than she did, if she had only received a little encouragement. She tried hard for it, but it never came. One habit, at any rate, Lionel Verner had not acquired, amid the many strange examples of an artificial age—that of not paying considerate respect, both in semblance and reality, to other men's wives.

"Oh, Mr. Verner, what a truant you are! You never come to pick up our arrows."

"Don't I?" said Lionel, with his courteous smile. "I will come presently, if I can. I am in search of Mrs. Verner. She has gone in to welcome a friend who has arrived."

And Mrs. Jocelyn had to go back to the targets alone.

There was a good deal of sickness at that time in Deerham. Often did Jan wish he could be master of Verner's Pride just for twelve months, or of any other "Pride" whose revenues were sufficient to remedy the evils existing in the poorer dwellings: the bad accommodation, within; the bad draining, without. Jan, had that desirable consummation arrived, would not have wasted time in thinking over it; he would have commenced the work in the same hour with his own hands. However, Jan, as is the case with most of us, had not to do with things as they might be, but with things as they were. The sickness was great, and Jan, in spite of his horse's help, was, as he often said, nearly worked off his legs.

About seven o'clock that evening he arrived home to tea.

The meal was over. But Miss Deborah had taken care of Jan's. Some excellent tea, and toasted tea-cakes, and a plate of ham were ready for him. Jan sat down by the fire, and, as Miss Deb said, took it in comfort. Truth to say, had Jan found only the remains of the tea-pot, and stale bread and butter, he might have thought it comfortable enough for him: he would not have grumbled had he found nothing.

"Any fresh messages in, do you know, Miss Deb?" he inquired.

"Now do pray get your tea in peace, Mr. Jan, and don't worry yourself over 'fresh messages,'" responded Miss Deb. "Master Cheese was called out to the surgery at tea-time, but I suppose it was nothing particular, for he was back again directly."

"Of course!" cried Jan. "*He'd* not lose his tea without a fight for it."

Jan finished his tea and departed to the surgery, catching sight of the coat-tails of Mr. Bitterworth's servant leaving it. Master Cheese was seated with the leech-basin before him. It was filled with Orleans plums, which he was eating with uncommon satisfaction. Bob stood at a respectful distance, his eyes wandering to the tempting collation, and his mouth watering.

"What did Bitterworth's man want?" inquired Jan of Master Cheese.

"The missis is taken bad again, he says," responded that gentleman, as distinctly as he could speak. "Croup, or something. Not as violent as before. Can wait."

"You had better go up at once," was Jan's reply.

Master Cheese was taken aback. "*I* go up!" he repeated, pulling a long face. "All that way! I had to go to Baker's and to Flint's between dinner and tea."

"And to how many Bakers and Flints have I to go between dinner and tea?" retorted Jan. "You know what to give Mrs. Bitterworth. So start."

Master Cheese felt terribly aggrieved. For one thing, it might be dangerous to leave those cherished plums in the leech-basin, Bob being within arm's-length of them: for another, Master Cheese liked his ease better than walking. He cast imploring glances at Jan, but they produced no effect, so he had to get his hat. Vacillating between the toll that might be taken of the plums if he left them, and the damage to his hair if he took them, he finally decided on the latter course. Emptying the plums into his hat, he put it on his head. Jan was looking over what they termed the call-book.

"Miss Deb says you were called out at tea-time," observed Jan, as Master Cheese was departing. "Who was it?"

"Nobody but old Hook. The girl was worse."

"What! Alice? Why have you not got it down here?" pointing to the book.

"Oh, they are nobody," grumbled Master Cheese. "I wonder the paupers are not ashamed to come here to our faces, asking for attendance and physic! They know they'll never pay."

"That's my business," said Jan. "Did he say she was very ill!"

"'Took dangerous,' *he* said," returned Master Cheese. "Thought she'd not live the night out."

Indefatigable Jan put on his hat, and went out with Master Cheese. Master Cheese turned leisurely towards Mr. Bitterworth's; Jan cut across the road at a strapping pace, and took the nearest way to Hook's cottage. It led him past the retired spot where he and Mr. Bourne had found Alice lying that former night.

Barely had Jan gained it when some tall, dark form came pushing through the trees at right angles, and was striding off in the distance. One moment's indecision—for Jan was not quite sure at first in the uncertain light—and then he put out his long legs to their utmost speed, bore down, and pinned the intruder.

"Now then!" said Jan. "Ghost or no ghost, who are you?"

He was answered by a laugh, and some joking words:

"Don't throttle me quite, Jan. Even a ghost can't stand that."

The laugh, the tone of the voice, fell upon Jan Verner's ears with the most intense astonishment. He peered into the speaker's face with his keen eyes, and gave vent to an exclamation. In spite of the whiskerless cheeks, of the elaborate black mark, in spite of the strange likeness to his brother, Jan recognized the features, not of Frederick, but of John Massingbird.

CHAPTER LVI.

DRESSING UP FOR A GHOST.

And so the mystery was out. And the ghost proved to be no ghost at all,—to be no husband of Sibylla—come to disturb her peace and that of Lionel; but *John* Massingbird in real flesh and blood.

There was so much explanation to ask and to be given, that Jan was somewhat hindered on his way to Hook's.

"I can't stop," said he, in the midst of a long sentence of John's. "Alice Hook may be dying. Will you remain here until I return?"

"If you are not long," responded John Massingbird. "I intend this to be my last night of concealment, and I want to go about, terrifying the natives. The fun it has been!"

"Fun you call it!" remarked Jan. "If Hook's girl dies, it will lie at your door."

"*She* won't die," lightly answered John. "I'll send her a ten-pound note to make amends. Make you haste, Jan, if I am to wait."

Jan sped off to Hook's. He found the girl very ill, but not so much so as Cheese had intimated. Some unseemly quarrel had taken place in the cottage, which had agitated her.

"There's no danger," mentally soliloquized Jan, "but it has thrown her back a good two days."

He found John Massingbird—restless John!—restless as ever!—pacing before the trees with hasty strides, and bursting into explosions of laughter.

"Some woman was coming along from one of the cottages by Broom's, and I appeared to her and sent her on howling," he

explained to Jan. "I think it was Mother Sykes. The sport this ghost affair has been!"

He sat down on a bench, held his sides, and gave vent to his laughter. Laughter is contagious, and Jan laughed with him, but in a quieter way.

"What ever put it into your head to personate Frederick?" inquired Jan. "Was it done to frighten the people?"

"Not at first," answered John Massingbird.

"Because, if to frighten had been your motive, you need only have appeared in your own person," continued Jan. "You were thought to be dead, you know, as much as Fred was. Fred *is* dead, I suppose?"

"Fred is dead, poor fellow, safe enough. I was supposed to be dead, but I came to life again."

"Did you catch Fred's star when he died?" asked Jan, pointing to the cheek.

"No," replied John Massingbird, with another burst of laughter, "I made that up with Indian-ink."

Bit by bit, Jan came into possession of the details. At least, as much of them as John Massingbird deemed it expedient to furnish. It appeared that his being attacked and robbed and left for dead, when travelling down to Melbourne, was perfectly correct. Luke Roy left him, believing he was dead. Luke would not have left him so hastily, but that he wished to be on the track of the thieves, and so hastened to Melbourne. After Luke's departure, John Massingbird came, as he phrased it, to life again. He revived from the suspended animation, or swoon, which, prolonged over some hours, had been mistaken for death. The bullet was extracted from his side, and he progressed pretty rapidly towards recovery.

Luke meanwhile had reached Melbourne; and had come into contact with a family named Eyre. Luke—if you have not forgotten—had said to Mr. Eyre that he had obtained a clue to the men who robbed his master; such, at least, was the information given by that gentleman to Sibylla Massingbird, on her subsequent sojourn at his house. He, Mr. Eyre, had said that Luke had promised to return the following day and inform him how he sped in the search, but Luke never did return; he had never seen him afterwards. All true. Luke found the clue, which he thought he had gained, to be no clue at all; but he heard news that pleased him better than fifty clues would have done—that his master, Mr. Massingbird, was alive. One who had travelled down to Melbourne from where John was lying, gave him the information. Without waiting to break bread or drink water, without giving another thought to Mr. Eyre, Luke started off there and then, to retrace his steps to John Massingbird. John was nearly well then, and they

returned at once to the diggings. In his careless way, he said the loss must be given up for a bad job; they should never find the fellows, and the best plan was to pick up more gold to replace that which had gone. Luke informed him he had written home to announce his death. John went into a fit of laughter, forbade Luke to contradict it, and anticipated the fun he should have in surprising them, when he went home on the accumulation of his fortune. Thus he stopped at the diggings, remaining in complete ignorance of the changes which had taken place; the voyage of Frederick and his wife to Melbourne, the death of Mr. Verner, the subsequent death of Frederick; and above all—for that would have told most on John—of the strange will left by Mr. Verner, which had made him inheritor of Verner's Pride.

But fortune did not come in the rapid manner fondly expected by John. The nuggets seemed shy. He obtained enough to rub along with, and that was all. The life did not ill suit him. To such a man as Lionel Verner, innately refined, just and conscientious, the life would have been intolerable, almost worse than death. John was not overburthened with any one of those qualities, and he rather liked the life than not. One thing was against him: he had no patience. Roving about from place to place, he was satisfied nowhere long. It was not only that he constantly changed the spot, or bed, of work, but he changed from one settlement to another. This was the reason probably that Captain Cannonby had never met with him; it was more than probable that it was the cause of his want of success. Luke Roy was not so fond of roving. He found a place likely to answer his expectations, and he remained at it; so that the two parted early, and did not again meet afterwards.

Suddenly John Massingbird heard that he had been left heir to Verner's Pride. He had gone down to Melbourne; and some new arrival from England—from the county in which Verner's Pride was situated—mentioned this in his hearing. The stranger was telling the tale of Mr. Verner's unaccountable will, of the death of John and Frederick Massingbird, and of the *consequent* accession of Lionel Verner; telling it as a curious bit of home gossip, unconscious that one of his listeners was the first-named heir—the veritable John Massingbird in person.

Too much given to act upon impulse, allowing himself no time to ascertain or to inquire whether the story might be correct or not, John Massingbird took berth in the first ship advertised for home. He possessed very little more money than would pay for his passage; he gave himself no concern how he was to get back to Australia, or how exist in England, should the news prove incorrect, but started away off-hand. Providing for the future had never been made a trouble by John Massingbird.

He sailed, and he arrived safely. But, once in England, it was necessary to proceed rather cautiously; and John, careless and reckless though he was, could not ignore the expediency of so acting. There were certain reasons why it would not be altogether prudent to show himself in the neighbourhood of Verner's Pride, unless his pocket were weighty enough to satisfy sundry claims which would inevitably flock in upon him. Were he sure that he was the legitimate master of Verner's Pride, he would have driven up in a coach-and-six, with flying flags and streamers to the horses, and so have announced his arrival in triumph. *Not* being sure, he preferred to feel his way, and this could not be done by arriving openly.

There was one place where he knew he could count upon being sheltered, while the way was "felt." And this was Giles Roy's. Roy would be true to him; would conceal him if need be; and would help him off again, if Verner's Pride, for him, proved a myth. This thought John Massingbird put into practice, arriving one dark night at Roy's, and startling Mrs. Roy nearly to death. Whatever fanciful ghosts the woman may have seen before, she never doubted that she saw a real ghost then.

His first question, naturally, was about the will. Roy told him it was perfectly true that a will had been made in his favour; but the will had been superseded by a codicil. And he related the circumstance of that codicil's mysterious loss. Was it found? John eagerly asked. Ah! there Roy could not answer him; he was at a nonplus; he was unable to say whether the codicil had been found or not. A rumour had gone about Deerham, some time subsequently to the loss, that it *had* been found, but Roy had never come to the rights of it. John Massingbird stared as he heard him say this. Then, couldn't he tell whether he was the heir or not? whether Lionel Verner held it by established right or by wrong? he asked. And Roy shook his head—he could not tell.

Under these uncertainties, Mr. John Massingbird did not see his way particularly clear, either to stop, or to go. If he stopped, and showed himself, he might be unpleasantly assured that the true heir of Verner's Pride inhabited Verner's Pride; if he went back to Australia, the no less mortifying fact might come out afterwards, that he was the heir to Verner's Pride, and had run away from his own.

What was to be done? Roy suggested perhaps the best plan that could be thought of—that Mr. Massingbird should remain in his cottage in concealment, while he, Roy, endeavoured to ascertain the truth regarding the codicil. And John Massingbird was fain to adopt it. He took up his abode in the upper bedroom, which had been Luke's, and Mrs. Roy, locking her front door.

carried his meals up to him by day, Roy setting himself to ferret out—as you may recollect—all he could learn about the codicil. The "all" was not much. Ordinary gossipers knew no more than Roy, whether the codicil had been found or not; and Roy tried to pump Matiss, by whom he was baffled; he even tried to pump Mr. Verner. He went up to Verner's Pride, ostensibly to ask whether he might paper Luke's old room at his own cost. In point of fact, the paper was dilapidated, and he did wish to make it decent for John Massingbird; but he could have done it without speaking to Mr. Verner. It was a great point with Roy to find favour in the sight of Mr. Massingbird, his possible future master. Lionel partially saw through the man; he believed that he had some covert motive in seeking the interview with him, and that Roy was trying to pry into his affairs. But Roy found himself baffled also by Mr. Verner, as he had been by Matiss, in so far that he could learn nothing certain of the existence or non-existence of the codicil.

Two days of condemned confinement were sufficient to tire out John Massingbird. To a man of active, restless temperament, who had lived almost day and night under the open skies, the being shut up in a small, close room was well-nigh unbearable. He could not stamp about its floor (there was no space to *walk* about in it), lest any intrusive neighbour below, who might have popped in, should say, "Who have you got up aloft?" He could not open the window and put his head out, to catch a breath of fresh air, lest prying eyes might be cast upon him.

"I can't stand this," he said to Roy. "A week of it would kill me. I shall go out at night."

Roy opposed the resolve so far as he dared—having an eye always to pleasing his future master. He represented to John Massingbird that he would inevitably be seen; and that he might just as well be seen by day as by night. John would not listen to reason. That very night, as soon as darkness came on, he went out, and *was* seen. Seen by Robin Frost.

Robin Frost, whatever superstitious or fond feelings he may have cherished, regarding the hoped-for reappearance of Rachel's spirit, was no believer in ghosts from a general point of view. In fact, that it was John Massingbird's ghost, never once entered Robin's mind. He came at once to the more sensible conclusion that some error had occurred with regard to his reported death, and that it was John Massingbird himself.

His deadly enemy. The only one, of all human beings upon earth, with whom Robin was at issue. For he believed that it was John Massingbird who had worked ill to Rachel. Robin, in his blind vengeance, took to lying in wait with a gun: and Roy became cognizant of this.

"You must not go out again, sir," he said to John Massingbird: "he may shoot you dead."

Curious, perhaps, to say, John Massingbird had himself come to the same conclusion—that he must not go out again. He had very narrowly escaped meeting one, who would as surely have known him, in the full moonlight, as did Robin Frost: one, whom it would have been nearly as inconvenient to meet, as Robin. And yet—remain in confinement by day and by night, he could not: he persisted that he should die. Almost better go back, unsatisfied, to Australia.

A bright idea occurred to John Massingbird. He would personate his brother. Frederick, so far as he knew, had neither creditors nor enemies round Deerham; and the likeness between them was so great, both in face and form, that there would be little difficulty in it. When they were at home together, John had been the stouter of the two: but his wanderings had fined him down, and his figure now looked exactly as Frederick's did formerly. He shaved off his whiskers—Frederick had never worn any; or, for the matter of that, never had had any to wear—and painted an imitation star on his cheek with Indian ink. His hair, too, had grown long on the voyage, and had not yet been cut: just as Frederick used to wear his. John had favoured a short crop of hair: Frederick a long one.

These little toilette mysteries accomplished, so exactly did he look like his brother Frederick, that Roy started when he saw him; and Mrs. Roy went into a prolonged scream that might have been heard at the brickfields. John attired himself in a long, loose dark coat which had seen service at the diggings, and sallied forth: the coat which had been mistaken for a riding-habit.

He enjoyed himself to his heart's content, receiving more fun than he had bargained for. It had not occurred to him to personate Frederick's *ghost:* he had only thought of personating Frederick himself: but to his unbounded satisfaction, he found the former supposition arrived at. He met old Matthew Frost; he frightened Dun Duff into fits; he frightened Master Cheese: he startled the parson; he solaced himself by taking up his station under the yew-tree on the lawn at Verner's Pride, to contemplate that desirable structure, which perhaps was his, and the gaiety going on in it. He had distinctly seen Lionel Verner leave the lighted rooms and approach him; upon which he retreated. Afterwards, it became rather a favourite night-pastime of his, to stand under the yew-tree at Verner's Pride. He was there again the night of the storm.

All this, the terrifying people into the belief that he was Frederick's veritable ghost, had been as choicest sport to John Massingbird. The trick might not have availed with Robin Frost, but they had

found a different method of silencing him. Of an easy, good-tempered nature, the thought of any real damage from consequences had been completely passed over by John. If Dan Duff did go into fits, he'd recover from them; if Alice Hook was startled into something worse, she was not dead. It was all sport to free-and-easy John: and, but for circumstances, there's no knowing how long he might have carried this game on. These circumstances touched upon a point that influences us all, more or less: pecuniary considerations. John was minus funds, and it was necessary that something should be done: he could not continue to live upon Roy.

It was Roy himself who at length hit upon the plan that brought forth certainty about the codicil. Roy found rumours were gaining ground abroad that it was not Frederick Massingbird's ghost, but Frederick himself; and he knew that the explanation must soon come. He determined to waylay Tynn, and make an apparent confidant of him: by these means he should, in all probability, arrive at the desired information. Roy did so: and found that there was no codicil. He carried his news to John Massingbird, advising that gentleman to go at once and put in his claim to Verner's Pride. John, elated with the news, protested he'd have one more night's fun first.

Such were the facts. John Massingbird told them to Jan, suppressing any little bit that he chose, here and there. The doubt about the codicil, for instance, and its moving motive in the affair, he did not mention.

"It has been the best fun I ever had in my life," he remarked. "I never shall forget the parson's amazed stare the first time I passed him. Or old Tynn's either, last night. Jan, you should have heard Dan Duff howl!"

"I have," said Jan. "I have had the pleasure of attending him. My only wonder is, that he did not throw himself into the pool, in his fright: as Rachel Frost did, time back."

John Massingbird caught the words up hastily. "How do you know that Rachel threw herself in? She may have been thrown in."

"For all I know, she may. Taking circumstances into consideration, however, I should say it was the other way."

"I say, Jan," interrupted John Massingbird, with another explosion, "didn't your Achates, Cheese, arrive home in a mortal fright one night?"

Jan nodded.

"I shall never forget him: never. He was marching up, all bravely, till he saw my face. Didn't he turn tail! There has been one person above all others, Jan, that I have wanted to meet, and have not met. Your brother Lionel."

"He'd have pinned you," said Jan.

"Not he. You would not have done it to-night, but that I *let* you do it. No chance of any one catching me, unless I chose. *I* was on the look-out for all I met, for all to whom I chose to show myself: *they* met me unawares. Unprepared for the encounter, whilst they were recovering their astonishment, I was beyond reach. Last night I had been watching over the gate ever so long, when I darted out in front of Tynn, to astonish him. Jan"—lowering his voice—"has it put Sibylla into a fright?"

"I think it has put Lionel into a worse," responded Jan.

"For fear of losing her?" laughed John Massingbird. "Wouldn't it have been a charming prospect for some husbands, who are tired of their wives! Is Lionel tired of his?"

"Can't say," replied Jan. "There's no appearance of it."

"I should be, if Sibylla had been my wife for two years," candidly avowed John Massingbird. "Sibylla and I never hit it off well as cousins: I'd not own her as wife, if she were dowered with all the gold mines in Australia. What Fred saw in her, was always a puzzle to me. *I* knew what was going on between them, though nobody else did. But, Jan, I'll tell you what astonished me more than everything else when I learnt it—that Lionel should have married her afterwards. I never could have imagined Lionel Verner taking up with another man's wife."

"She was his widow," cried literal Jan.

"It's all the same. And there's something about Lionel Verner, with his sensitive refinement, that does not seem to accord with the notion. Is she healthy?"

"Who? Sibylla? I don't fancy she has much of a constitution."

"No, that she has not! There are no children, I hear. Jan, though, you need not have pinched so hard when you pounced upon me," he continued, rubbing his arm. "I was not going to run away."

"How did I know that?" said Jan.

"It's my last night of fun, and when I saw you I said to myself, 'I'll be caught.' How are old Deb and Amilly?"

"Much as usual. Deb's in a fever just now. She has heard that Fred Massingbird's back, and thinks Sibylla ought to leave Lionel on the strength of it."

John laughed again. "It must have put others into a fever, I know, besides poor old Deb. Jan, I can't stop talking to you all night, I should get no more fun. I wish I could appear to all Deerham collectively, and send it into fits after Dan Duff! To-morrow, as soon as I genteelly can after breakfast, I go up to Verner's Pride and show myself. One can't go at six in the morning."

He went off in the direction of Clay Lane as he spoke, and Jan turned to make the best of his way to Verner's Pride.

They had dined unusually late at Verner's Pride that evening, and Lionel Verner was with his guests when Jan arrived.

"Not out from dinner!" cried Jan, in astonishment, when Tynn denied him to Lionel. "Why, it's my supper-time! I must see him, whether he's at dinner or not. Go and say so, Tynn. Something important, tell him."

The message brought Lionel out. Thankful, probably, to get out. Playing host with a mind ill at ease jars upon the troubled and fainting spirit! Jan, disdaining the invitation to the drawing-room, had hoisted himself on to the top of an old carved ebony cabinet that stood in the hall, containing curiosities, and sat there with his legs dangling. He jumped off when Lionel appeared, wound his arm within his, and drew him out on the terrace.

"I have got to the bottom of it, Lionel," said he, without further circumlocution. "I dropped upon the ghost just now and pinned him. It is not Fred Massingbird."

Lionel paused, and then drew a deep breath; as one who has been relieved from some great care.

"Cannonby said it was not!" he exclaimed. "Cannonby is here, Jan, and assures me Frederick Massingbird is dead and buried. Who is it then? Have you found it out?"

"I pinned him, I say," said Jan. "I was going down to Hook's, and he crossed my path. He——"

"It is some one who has been doing it for a trick?" interrupted Lionel.

"Well—yes—in one sense. It is not Fred Massingbird, Lionel; he is dead, safe enough; but it is some one from a distance: one who will cause you little less trouble. Not any less, in fact, putting Sibylla out of the question."

Lionel stopped in his walk—they were pacing the terrace—and looked at Jan with some surprise: a smile, in his new security, lighting his face.

"There is no one in the world, Jan, dead or alive, who could bring trouble to me, except Frederick Massingbird. Any one else may come, so long as he does not."

"Ah! You are thinking only of Sibylla."

"Of whom else should I think?"

"Yourself," replied Jan.

Lionel laughed in his gladness. *How* thankful he was for his wife's sake ONE alone knew. "I am nobody, Jan. Any trouble coming to me I can battle with."

"Well, Lionel, the returned man is John Massingbird."

"John—Mass—ingbird!"

He was the very last to whom Lionel Verner had cast a thought. That it was John who had returned, had not entered his imagination. He had never cast a doubt on the fact of his death. Bringing the name out slowly, he stared at Jan in very astonishment.

"Well," said he, presently, "John is not Frederick."

"No," assented Jan. "He can put in no claim to your wife. But he can to Verner's Pride."

The words caused Lionel's heart to go with a bound. A great evil for him: there was no doubt of it; but still slight, compared with the one he had dreaded for Sibylla.

"There is no mistake, I suppose, Jan?"

"There's no mistake," replied Jan. "I have been talking to him this half-hour. He is in hiding at Roy's."

"Why should he be in hiding at all?" inquired Lionel.

"He had two or three motives, he said:" and Jan proceeded to give Lionel a summary of what he had heard. "He was not very explicit to me," concluded Jan. "Perhaps he will be more so to you. He says he is coming to Verner's Pride to-morrow morning at the earliest genteel hour after breakfast."

"And what does he say to the fright he has caused?" resumed Lionel.

"Does nothing but laugh over it. Says it's the primest fun he ever had in his life. He has come back very poor, Lionel."

"Poor? Then, were Verner's Pride and its revenues not his, I could have understood why he would not like to show himself openly. Well! well! compared with what I feared, it is a mercy. Sibylla is free; and I—I must make the best of it. He will be a more generous master of Verner's Pride—as I believe—than Frederick would ever have been."

"Yes," nodded Jan. "In spite of his faults. And John Massingbird used to have plenty."

"I don't know who amongst us is without them, Jan. Unless—upon my word, old fellow, I mean it!—unless it is you."

Jan opened his great eyes with a stare. It never occurred to humble-minded Jan that there was anything in *him* approaching to goodness. He supposed Lionel had spoken in joke.

"What's that?" cried he.

Jan alluded to a sudden burst of laughter, to a sound of many voices, to fair forms that were flitting before the windows. The ladies had gone into the drawing-room. "What a relief it will be to Sibylla!" involuntarily uttered Lionel.

"She'll make a face at losing Verner's Pride," was the less poetical remark of Jan.

"Will he turn us out at once, Jan?"

"He said nothing to me on that score, nor I to him," was Jan's

answer. "Look here, Lionel. Old West's a screw, between ourselves; but what I do earn is my own: so don't get breaking your rest, thinking you'll not have a pound or two to turn to. If John Massingbird does send you out, I can manage things for you, if you don't mind living quietly."

Honest Jan! His notions of "living quietly" would have comprised a couple of modest rooms, cotton umbrellas like his own, and a mutton chop a day. And Jan would have gone without the chop himself, to give it to Lionel. To Sibylla, also. Not that he had any great love for that lady, in the abstract; but, for Jan to eat chops, while any one, no matter how remotely connected with him, wanted them, would have been completely out of Jan's nature.

A lump was rising in Lionel's throat. *He* loved Jan, and knew his worth, if no one else did. While he was swallowing it down, Jan went on, quite eagerly.

"Something else might be thought of, Lionel. I don't see why you and Sibylla should not come to old West's. The house is large enough: and Deb and Amilly couldn't object to it for their sister. In point of right, half the house is mine: West said so when I became his partner: and I paid my share for the furniture. He asked me if I'd not like to marry, and said there was the half of the house; but I told him I'd rather be excused. I might get a wife, you know, Lionel, who'd be grumbling at me all day, as my mother does. Now, if you and Sibylla would come there, the matter as to your future would be at rest. I'd divide what I get between you and Miss Deb. Half to her for the extra cost you'd be to the housekeeping; the other half for pocket-money for you and Sibylla. I think you might make it do, Lionel: my share is quite two hundred a year. My own share, I mean: besides what I hand over to Miss Deb, and transmit to the doctor, and other expenses. Could you manage with it?"

"Jan!" said Lionel, from between his quivering lips. "Dear Jan, there's——"

They were interrupted. Bounding out at the drawing-room window, the very window at which Lucy Tempest had sat that night and watched the yew-tree, came Sibylla, jewels glittering from her hair, the silken lustre of her costly robes glittering too. But she looked terribly cross at Jan.

"Mr. Jan Verner, I should like to know what right you have to send for Lionel from the room when he is at dinner? If he *is* your brother, you have no business to forget yourself in that way. He can't help your being his brother, I suppose; but you ought to know better than to presume upon it."

"Sibylla——"

"Be quiet, Lionel. I *shall* tell him of it. Never was such a

thing heard of, as for a gentleman to be called out for nothing, from his dinner table! You do it again, Jan, and I shall order Tynn to close the doors of Verner's Pride to you."

"Hush, Sibylla! Jan came to tell me some grateful news. He has discovered who it is that we have been mistaking for Frederick Massingbird."

"It is not Frederick Massingbird," cried Sibylla, speaking sharply. "Captain Cannonby says that it cannot be."

"No, it is not Frederick Massingbird—God be thanked!" said Lionel. "With that knowledge, we can afford to hear who it is bravely; can we not, Sibylla?"

"I *wish* you'd tell—beating about the bush like that! You need not stare so, Jan. I don't believe you know."

"It is your cousin, Sibylla; John Massingbird."

A moment's pause. And then, clutching at the hand of Lionel—

"Who?" she shrieked.

"Hush, my dear. It is John Massingbird."

"Not dead! Did he not die?"

"No. He recovered, when left, as was supposed, for dead. He is coming here to-morrow morning, Jan says."

Sibylla let her hands fall. She staggered back to a pillar and leaned against it, her upturned face white in the starlight.

"Is—is—is Verner's Pride yours or his?" she gasped in a low tone.

"It is his."

"His! Neither yours nor mine?"

"It is only his, Sibylla."

She raised her hands again; she began fighting the air, as if she would beat off an imaginary John Massingbird. Another moment, and her laughter and her cries came forth together. She was in strong hysterics. Lionel supported her, while Jan ran for water; and the gay company came flocking out of the lighted rooms.

CHAPTER LVII.

NO HOME.

PEOPLE talk of a nine-days' wonder. But no nine-days' wonder has ever been heard of, or known, equal to that which fell on Deerham, and went booming to the very extremities of the county. Lionel Verner, the legitimate heir—it may so be said—the possessor of Verner's Pride, was turned out of it to make room for an alien. resuscitated from the supposed dead.

Sailors tell us that rats desert a sinking ship. Pseudo friends desert a falling house. You may revel in these friends in prosperity, but when adversity sets in, how they fall away! On the very day that John Massingbird arrived at Verner's Pride, and it became known that not he, but Mr. and Mrs. Verner must leave it, the gay company, gathered there, dispersed.

"You'll not turn them out, Massingbird?" cried Jan, in his straightforward way, drawing the gentleman into the fruit-garden to a private conference. "*I* wouldn't."

John Massingbird laughed good-humouredly. He had been in the sunniest humour throughout; had made his first appearance at Verner's Pride in bursts of laughter, heartily grasping the hands of Lionel and Sibylla, and boasting of the "fun" he had had in playing the ghost. Captain Cannonby, the only guest who remained, grew charmed with John; and stated his private opinion in the ear of Lionel Verner that he was worth a hundred of Frederick.

"How can I help turning them out?" answered he. "*I* didn't make the will—it was old Daddy Verner."

"You need not act upon the will," said Jan. "There was a codicil, you know, superseding it, though it can't be found. Sibylla's your cousin—it would be cruel to turn her from her home."

"Two masters never answered in a house yet," nodded John. "I am not going to try it."

"Let them remain in Verner's Pride, and you go elsewhere," suggested Jan.

John Massingbird laughed for five minutes. "How uncommon *young* you are, Jan!" said he. "Has Lionel been putting you up to try this on?"

Jan swung himself on to a tolerably strong branch of the mulberry-tree, regardless of any damage the ripe fruit might inflict on his nether garments, as he answered:

"Knowing Lionel, you needn't ask it, Massingbird. There'd be difficulty in getting him to stop at Verner's Pride now, but he might be coaxed into doing it for the sake of his wife. She'll have a fit of illness if she has to go out of it. Lionel is one to stand by his own to the last; while Verner's Pride was his, he'd have fought to retain its possession, inch by inch; but let ever so paltry a quibble of the law take it from him, and he'd not lift up his finger to keep it. But I say that I think he might be got to do it for Sibylla."

"I'll tell you a secret, Jan," cried John Massingbird. "I wouldn't have Sibylla stop in Verner's Pride if she paid me ten thousand a year for the favour. There? And as to resigning Verner's Pride the minute I come into it, no one but a child or Jan Verner could

ever have started so absurd an idea. If anything makes me feel cross, it is the thought of my having been knocking about yonder, when I might have been living in clover here. I'd get up an Ever-perpetual benefit-my-fellow-creature Society, if I were you, Jan, and hold meetings at Exeter Hall!"

"Not in my line," said Jan, swaying himself about on the bough.

"Isn't it! I should say it was. Why don't you invite Sibylla to your house, if you are so fond of her?"

"She won't come," said Jan.

"Perhaps you have not asked her!"

"I was beginning to ask her, but she flew at me and ordered me to hold my tongue. No, I see it," Jan added in soliloquy, "she'll never come there. I thought she might: and I got Miss Deb to think so. She'll—she'll——"

"She'll what?" asked John Massingbird.

"She'll be a thorn in Lionel's side, I'm afraid."

"Nothing more likely," acquiesced easy John. "Roses and thorns go together. If gentlemen will marry the one, they must expect to have their share of the other."

Jan jumped off his bough. His projects all appeared to be failing. The more he had dwelt upon his scheme, that Dr. West's house might afford an asylum for Lionel and his wife, the more he had become impressed with its advantages. Jan Verner, though the most unselfish, perhaps it may be said the most improvident of mortals, with regard to himself, had a considerable amount of forethought for the rest of the world. It had struck him, even before it struck Lionel, that, if turned out of Verner's Pride, Lionel would *want* a home; want it in the broadest acceptation of the word. It would have been Jan's delight to give him one. He, Jan, went home, told Miss Deb the news that it was John Massingbird who had returned, not Frederick, and imparted his views of future arrangements.

Miss Deb was dubious. For Mr. Verner of Verner's Pride to become an inmate of their home, dependent on her housekeeping, looked a formidable affair. But Jan pointed out that, Verner's Pride *gone*, it appeared to be but a choice of cheap lodgings: their house would be an improvement upon that. And Miss Deb acquiesced: and grew to contemplate the addition to her family, in conjunction with the addition Jan proposed to add to her income, with great satisfaction.

That failed. Failed upon Jan's first hint of it to Mrs. Verner. She—to use his own expression—flew out at him, at the bare hint: and Sibylla Verner could fly out in an unseemly manner when she chose.

Jan's next venture had been with John Massingbird. That was failure the second. "Where are they to go?" thought Jan.

It was a question that Lionel Verner may also have been asking in his inmost heart. As yet he could not look his situation fully in the face. Not from any want of moral courage, but because of the inextricable confusion that his affairs seemed to be in. And, let his moral courage be what it would, the aspect they bore might have caused a heart more hardy than Lionel's to shrink. *How much he owed he could not tell;* nothing but debt stared him in the face. He had looked to the autumn rents of Verner's Pride to extricate him from a portion of his difficulties; and now those rents would be received by John Massingbird. The furniture in the house, plate, linen, none of it was his: it had been left by the will with Verner's Pride. The five-hundred pounds, all that he had inherited by that will, had been received at the time—and was gone. One general sinking-fund seemed to have swallowed up everything; that, and all else; leaving a string of debts a yard long in its place.

Reproaches now would be useless; whether self-reproaches, or reproaches to his wife. The latter, Lionel would never have given. And yet, when he looked back, and thought how free from debt he might have been, nothing but reproach, however vaguely directed, reproach of the past generally, seemed to fill his heart. To turn out into the world, a free man, though penniless, would have been widely different from turning out plunged over head and ears in difficulties.

In what quarter did he not owe money? He could not say. He had not been very provident, and Sibylla had not been provident at all. But this much might be said for Lionel: he had not wasted money on useless things, or in self-indulgence. The improvements he had begun on the estate had been the chief drain, so far as he went; and the money they took had caused him to get backward with general expenses. He had also been very liberal to his mother. Money was owing on all sides; for great things and for small; how much, Lionel did not yet know. He did not know—he was afraid to guess—what private debts might have been contracted by his wife. There had been times lately when, in contemplating the embarrassment growing so hopelessly upon him, Lionel had felt inclined to wish that some climax would come and end it; but he had never dreamt of such a climax as this. A hot flush dyed his cheeks as he remembered that there was nearly a twelvemonth's wages owing to most of his servants; and he had not the means now of paying them.

"Stop on a bit if you like," said John Massingbird, in hearty tones; "stop a month, if you will. You are welcome. If will be only changing your place from master to guest."

From master to guest! That same day John Massingbird

assumed his own place, unasked, at the head of the dinner-table. Lionel went to the side with a flushed face. John Massingbird had never been remarkable for delicacy, but Lionel could not help thinking that he might have waited until he was gone, before assuming full mastership. Captain Cannonby made the third at dinner, and he, by John Massingbird's request, took the foot of the table. It was not being put out of his place that hurt Lionel so much, as the feeling of annoyance that John Massingbird could behave so unlike a gentleman. He felt ashamed for him. Dinner over, Lionel went up to his wife, who was keeping her room, partly from temper, partly from illness.

"Sibylla, I shall not stop here another day," he said. "I see that John Massingbird wants us to go. Now, what shall I do? Take lodgings?"

Sibylla looked up from the sofa, her eyes red with crying, her face inflamed.

"Any one but you, Lionel, would never allow him to turn you out. Why don't you dispute his right? Turn *him* out, and defy him!"

He did not tell Sibylla that she was talking like a child. He only said that John Massingbird's claim to Verner's Pride was indisputable—it had been his all along; that, in point of fact, he himself had been the usurper.

"Then you mean," she said, "to give up quiet possession to him?"

"I have no other resource, Sibylla. To attempt any sort of resistance would be foolish as well as wrong."

"*I* shan't give it up. I shall stay here in spite of him. You may do as you like, but he is not going to turn me out of my own home."

"Sibylla, will you try and be rational for once? If ever a time called for it, it is the present. I ask you whether I shall seek lodgings."

"And I wonder that you are not ashamed to ask me," retorted Sibylla, bursting into tears. "Lodgings, after Verner's Pride! No. I'd rather die that go into lodgings. I dare say I shall die soon, with all this affliction upon me."

"I do not see what else there is for us but lodgings," resumed Lionel, after a pause. "You will not hear of Jan's proposition."

"Go back to my old home!" she shrieked. "Like—as poor Fred used to say—bad money returned. No! that I never will. You are wrapt up in Jan: if he proposed to give me poison, you'd say Yes. I wish Fred had not died!"

"Will you be so good as to tell me what *you* think ought to be done?" inquired Lionel.

"How can I think? Where's the good of asking me? I think the least you can do in this wretchedness, is to take as much worry off me as you can, Lionel."

"It is what I wish to do," he said. "But I can see only one plan for us, Sibylla—lodgings. Here we cannot stay; it is out of the question. To take a house is equally so. We have no furniture—no money, in short, to set up a house, or to keep it on. Jan's plan, until I can turn myself round and see what's to be done, would be best. You would be going to your own sisters, who would take care of you, should I find it necessary to be away."

"Away! Where?" she quickly asked.

"I must go somewhere and do something. I cannot lead an idle life, living upon other people's charity, or let you live upon it. I must find some way of earning a livelihood: in London, perhaps. While I am looking out, you would be with your sisters."

"Then, Lionel, hear me!" she cried, her throat working, her blue eyes flashing with a strange light. "I will *never* go home to my sisters! I will never, so long as I live, enter that house again, to reside in it! You are no better than a bear to wish me to do it."

What was he to do? She was his wife, and he must provide for her: but she would go neither into lodgings, nor to the proposed home. Lionel set his wits to work.

"I wonder—whether—my mother—would invite us there, for a short time?" The words were spoken slowly; reluctantly: as if there were an undercurrent of doubt in his mind. "Would you go to Deerham Court for a time, Sibylla, if Lady Verner were agreeable?"

"Yes," said Sibylla, after a minute's consideration. "I'd go there."

The question was put to Lady Verner, and her answer was cordial and satisfactory. She would welcome them with pleasure, until Lionel had decided on some course. But there was a stormy battle with Sibylla, when she found she could not take her maid Benoite with her.

Sibylla made no further opposition, and came down dressed at the hour fixed for departure. Heavy work it had been; singling out their personal effects from what was no longer theirs. John Massingbird was in the study. Its great desk, a whole mass of papers crowded above it and underneath it, was pushed into the remotest corner. Lionel had left things connected with the estate as straight as he could. He wished to explain affairs to John Massingbird, to hand over documents and all else in due form, but he was not allowed to do so. Business and John had never agreed. John was sitting now before the window, his elbows on the sill, a rough cap on his head, and a short clay pipe in his mouth.

Lionel glanced with dismay at the confusion reigning amidst the papers.

"Fare you well, John Massingbird," said Sibylla.

"Going?" said John, turning coolly round. "Good day."

"And let me tell you, John Massingbird," continued Sibylla, "that if ever you had been turned out of your home, as you have turned us, you would know what it was."

"Bless you! I've never had anything of my own to be turned out of, except a tent," said John, with a laugh.

"It is to be hoped that you may, then, some time, and that you will be turned out of it! That's my best wish for you, John Massingbird."

"I'd recommend you to be polite, young lady," returned John, good-humouredly. "If I sue your husband for back rents, you wouldn't be quite so independent, I calculate."

"Back rents!" repeated she.

"Back rents," assented John. "But we'll leave that discussion to another time. Don't you be saucy, Sibylla."

"John," said Lionel, pointing to the papers, "are you aware that some valuable leases and other agreements are amongst those papers? You might get into inextricable confusion with your tenants, were you to mislay, or lose them."

"They are safe enough," said careless John, taking his pipe from his mouth to speak.

"I wish you had allowed me to put things in order for you. You will be wanting me to do it later."

"Not a bit of it," said John Massingbird. "I am not going to upset my equanimity with leases, and bothers of that sort. Good-bye, old fellow. I say, Lionel!"

Lionel turned round. He had been going out.

"We part friends, don't we?"

"I can answer for myself," said Lionel, a frank smile rising to his lips. "It would be unjust to blame you for taking what you have a right to take."

"All right. Then, Lionel, you'll come and see me here?"

"Sometimes. Yes."

They went out to the carriage, Lionel conducting his wife, and John in attendance, smoking his short pipe. The handsome carriage, no longer Sibylla's, with its rich white lining, its silver mountings and its arms on the ultramarine panels. The Verner arms. Would John paint them out? Probably not. One badge on the panels of his carriages was as good to John Massingbird as another. He must have gone to the Heralds' College had he wanted to set up arms on his own account.

And that's how Lionel and his wife went out of Verner's Pride.

It seemed as if Deerham pavement and Deerham windows were lined on purpose to watch the exodus. Their time of departure had got wind.

"I have done a job that goes again the grain, sir," said Wigham to his late master, when the carriage had deposited its freight at Deerham Court, and was about to go back again. "I never thought, sir, to drive you out of Verner's Pride for the last time."

"I suppose not, Wigham. I thought it as little as you."

"You'll not forget, sir, that I should be glad to serve you, should you ever have room for me. I'd rather live with you, sir, than with anybody else in the world."

"Thank you, Wigham. I fear that time will be very far off."

Decima hastened forward to welcome Sibylla. Decima was one who, in her quiet way, was always trying to make the best of surrounding circumstances,—not for herself, but for others. Let things be ever so dark, she would contrive to extract out of them some little ray of brightness. Opposite as they were in person and disposition she and Jan were true brother and sister. She came forward to the door, a glad smile upon her face, dressed rather more than usual. It was one of her ways of showing welcome and consideration to Sibylla.

"You are late, Mrs. Verner," she said, taking her cordially by the hand. "We have been expecting you some time. Catherine! Thérèse, see to these packages."

Lady Verner had actually come out also. She was too essentially a lady to show anything but strict courtesy to Sibylla, now that she was about to become an inmate under her roof. What the effort cost her, she best knew. It was no light one: and Lionel felt that it was not. She stood in the hall, just outside the door of the ante-room, and took Sibylla's hand as she approached.

"I am happy to see you, Mrs. Verner," she said with stately courtesy. "I hope you will make yourself at home."

They all went together into the drawing-room. Lucy was there, dressed also. She came up with a smile on her young and charming face, as she held out her hand to Sibylla.

"It is nearly dinner-time," said Decima to Sibylla. "Will you come with me upstairs, and I will show you the arrangements for your rooms.

A handsome bedroom, a dressing-room, and the pretty sitting-room, with its blue and white furniture, had been given up to them. But Sibylla ungratefully contrasted them with the finer apartments at Verner's Pride, and grew querulously fretful because she could not find some gold combs that she wanted to wear in her hair.

Jan arrived, and Lady Verner went with him into another room. Lucy alone remained with Lionel.

"I hear that you and Decima have given up the blue sitting-room to us, Lucy," he said. "I am vexed. How shall you do without it?"

"Nay, that's nothing," said Lucy, with a smile. "How did we do without it, when you were recovering from that long illness? We had to do without it then."

"I think not, Lucy. So far as *my* memory serves me, you sat in it a great portion of your time—cheering me. I have not forgotten it, if you have."

Neither had she—by her heightened colour.

"I mean that we had to do without it for our own purposes, our drawing and our work. It is a little matter, after all; I wish we could do more for you and Mrs. Verner. I wish," she added, her voice betraying her emotion, "that we could have prevented your being turned from Verner's Pride."

"Ay," he said, speaking with affected carelessness, and turning about an ornament in his fingers, which he had taken from the mantel-piece, "it is not an every-day calamity."

"What shall you do?" asked Lucy, going a little nearer to him, and dropping her voice to a tone of confidence.

"Do? In what way, Lucy?"

"Shall you be content to live on here with Lady Verner? Not seeking to retrieve your—your position in any way?"

"My living on here, Lucy, will be out of the question. That would never do, for more reasons than one."

Did Lucy Tempest divine what one of these reasons might be? She did not intend to look at him, but she caught his eyes in the glass. Lionel smiled.

"I am thinking what a trouble you must find me. You and Decima."

She did not speak at first. Then she went quite close to him, her earnest, sympathizing eyes cast up to his.

"If you please, you need not pretend to make light of it to me," she whispered. "I don't like you to think that I do not know all you must feel, and what a blow it is. I think I feel it quite as much as you can do—for your sake, and for Mrs. Verner's. I lie awake at night, thinking about it; but I do not say so to Decima and Lady Verner. I make light of it to them, as you are making light of it to me."

"I know, I know!" he uttered, in a tone that would have been passionate, but for its despair. "My whole life, for a long time, has been one long scene of acting—to you. I dare not make it otherwise. There is no remedy for it."

She had not anticipated the outburst; she had simply wished to express her sympathy for their great misfortunes, as she might have

expressed it to any other gentleman who had been turned from his home with his wife. She could not bear for Lionel not to know that he had her deepest, her kindliest, her truest sympathy: and this had nothing to do with any secret feeling she might, or might not, entertain for him. Indeed, but for the unpleasant consciousness of that very feeling, Lucy would have made her sympathy more demonstrative. The outbreak seemed to check her; to throw her friendship back upon herself; and she stood irresolute; but she was too single-minded, too full of nature's truth, to be angry with what had been a genuine outpouring of his inmost heart, drawn from him in a moment of irrepressible sorrow. Lionel let the ornament fall back on the mantel-piece, and turned to her, his manner changing. He took her hands, clasping them in one of his; he laid his other hand lightly on her fair young head, reverently as any old grandfather might have done.

"Lucy!—my dear friend!—you must not mistake me. There are times when some of the bitterness within me is drawn forth, and I say more than I ought: what I never should say, in a calmer moment. I wish I *could* talk to you; I wish I could give you the full confidence of all my sorrows, as I gave it you on another subject once before. I wish I could draw you to my side, as though you were my sister, or one of my dearest friends, and tell you of the great trouble at my heart. But it cannot be. I thank you, I *thank* you for your sympathy. I know that you would give me your friendship in all single-heartedness, as Decima might give it me; and it would be to me as a green spot in life's arid desert. But the oasis might grow too dear to me, Lucy; and my only plan is to be wise in time, and to forego it."

"I only meant to express my sorrow for you and Mrs. Verner," she timidly answered. "My sense of the calamity which has fallen upon you."

"Child, I know it: and I dare not say how I feel it; I dare not thank you as I ought. In truth it is a terrible calamity. All its consequences I cannot yet anticipate: but they may be worse than any one suspects, or than I like to glance at. It is a deep and apparently an irremediable misfortune: I cannot but feel it keenly: and I feel it for my wife more than for myself. Now and then, something like a glimpse of consolation shows itself—that it has not been brought on by any fault of mine; and that, humanly speaking, I have done nothing to deserve it."

"Mr. Cust used to tell us that however dark a misfortune might be, however hopeless even, there was sure to be a way of looking at it, by which we might see that it might have been darker," observed Lucy. "He used to tell us another thing: that these apparently hopeless misfortunes sometimes turn out to be great benefits

to us in the end. Who knows but in a short time, through some magic or other, you may be back again at Verner's Pride? Would not that be happiness?"

"I don't know about happiness, Lucy; sometimes I feel tired of everything," he wearily answered. "As if I should like to run away for ever, and be at rest. My life at Verner's Pride was anything but a bed of rose-leaves."

He heard his mother's voice in the ante-room, and went forward to open the door for her. Lady Verner came in, followed by Jan. Jan was going to dine there; and Jan was actually in orthodox dinner costume. Decima had invited him, and Decima had told him to be sure to dress himself; she wanted to make a little festival of the evening to welcome Lionel and his wife. So Jan remembered, and appeared in black: but the gloss of the whole thing was taken off by Jan's having his shirt fastened down the front with pins, where the buttons ought to be.

"Is that a new fashion coming in, Jan?" asked Lady Verner. pointing with some asperity to the pins.

"It's to be hoped not," replied Jan. "It took me five minutes to stick them in, and there's one of the pins running into my wrist now. It's a new shirt of mine come home, and they have forgotten the buttons. Miss Deb caught sight of it, when I went in to tell her I was coming here, and ran after me with a needle and thread, wanting to sew them on."

Sibylla had been keeping them waiting. She came in now, radiant with smiles and in her gold combs. None, to look at her, would suppose she had that day lost a home. A servant appeared and announced dinner.

Lionel went up to Lady Verner. Whenever he dined there, unless there were other guests besides himself, he had been in the habit of taking her in to dinner. Lady Verner drew back.

"No, Lionel. I consider that you and I are both at home now. Take Miss Tempest."

He could only waive his right and obey. He held out his arm to Lucy, and they went forward.

"Am I to take anybody?" inquired Jan.

That was just like Jan! Lady Verner pointed to Sibylla, and Jan marched off with her. Lady Verner and Decima followed.

"Not there, Lucy," said Lady Verner, for Lucy was taking the place she was accustomed to, by Lady Verner. "Lionel, you will take the foot of the table now, and Lucy will sit by you."

Lady Verner was rather a stickler for etiquette, and at last they fell into their appointed places. Herself and Lionel opposite each other, Lucy and Decima on one side the table, Jan and Sibylla on the other.

"If I am to have you under my wing as a rule, Miss Lucy, take care that you behave yourself," nodded Lionel.

Lucy laughed, and dinner proceeded. But there was probably an undercurrent of consciousness in the hearts of both—at any rate, there was in his—that it might have been more expedient, all things considered, that Lucy Tempest's place had not been fixed by the side of Lionel Verner.

Dinner was half over when Sibylla suddenly laid down her knife and fork, and burst into tears. They looked at her in consternation. Lionel rose.

"That horrid John Massingbird," escaped her lips. "I always disliked him."

"Goodness!" uttered Jan, "I thought you were taken ill, Sibylla. What's the good of thinking about it?"

"According to you, there's no good in thinking of anything," tartly responded Sibylla. "You told me yesterday not to think about Fred, when I said I wished he had come back instead of John—if one of them must have come back."

"At any rate, don't think about unpleasant things now," was Jan's answer. "Eat your dinner."

CHAPTER LVIII.

JAN'S SAVINGS.

LIONEL VERNER looked his situation full in the face. It was not a desirable one. When he had been turned out of Verner's Pride before, it is probable he had thought *that* about the extremity of all human calamity; but that, looking back upon it, appeared a position to be coveted, as compared with this. In point of fact it was so. He was free then from pecuniary liabilities; he did not owe a shilling in the world; he had five-hundred pounds in his pocket; no one but himself to look to; and—he was a younger man. In the matter of years he was not so very much older now; but Lionel Verner, since his marriage, had bought some experience in human disappointment, and nothing ages a man's inward feelings like it.

He was now, with his wife, a burden upon his mother; a burden she could ill afford. Lady Verner was somewhat embarrassed as to her own means, and she was preparing to reduce her establishment to the size that it had been in her grumbling days. If Lionel had only been free! free from debt and difficulty! he would have gone out into the world and put his shoulder to the wheel.

Claims had poured in upon him without end. Besides the obligations he already knew of, not a day passed but the post brought him

outstanding accounts from London, with demands for a speedy settlement; debts contracted by his wife. Mr. Verner of Verner's Pride might not have been troubled with these accounts for years, had his wife so managed; but Mr. Verner, without Verner's Pride, found the demands pouring thick and threefold upon his head. It was of no *use* to reproach Sibylla; of no use even to speak, except to ask "Is such-and-such a bill a just claim?" Any approach to such topics was the signal for an unseemly burst of passion on her part; or for a fit of hysterics, in which fashionable affectation Sibylla had lately become an adept. She *tried* Lionel terribly: worse than tongue can tell or pen can write. There was no social, confidential intercourse between them. Lionel could not go to her for sympathy, for counsel, or for comfort; if he attempted to talk over any plans for the immediate future; what they could do, what they could not do; what might be best, what worst; she met him with the frivolousness of a child, or with a sullen reproach that he "did nothing but worry her." For any purposes of companionship, his wife was a nonentity; far better that he had been without one. She made his whole life a penance; she betrayed the frivolous folly of her nature ten times a day; she betrayed her pettish temper, her want of self-control, dyeing Lionel's face blood-red. He felt ashamed for her; he felt doubly ashamed for himself; that his mother, that Lucy Tempest should at last become aware what sort of a wife he had taken to his bosom, what description of wedded life was his.

What was he to do for a living? The only thing that appeared open to him was to endeavour to get some sort of a situation, where, by means of hands or head, he might earn a competency. And yet, to do this, it was necessary to be free from the danger of arrest. He went about in dread of it. Were he to show himself in London he felt sure that not an hour would pass, but he should be sued and taken. If his country creditors accorded him forbearance, his town ones would not. Any fond hope that he had formerly entertained of studying for the Bar, was not available now. He had neither the means nor the time to give to it: the time for study ere remuneration should come. Occasionally a thought would cross him that some friend or other of his prosperity might procure him a government situation. A consulship, or vice-consulship abroad, for instance. *Any* thing abroad: not to avoid paying his creditors, for abroad or at home, Lionel would be sure to pay them, if by dint of economizing he could find the means to do so: but that he might run away from home and mortification, take his wife and make the best of her. But consulships and other government appointments are more easily talked of than obtained: as any one, who has tried for them under difficulties, knows. Moreover, although Lionel had never taken a prominent part in politics, the Verner interest had

always been given against the government party then in power. He did not see his way at all clearly before him; and he found that it was to be still further obstructed on another score.

After thinking and planning and plotting until his brain grew bewildered, he at length made up his mind to go to London, and see whether anything could be done. With regard to his creditors there, he must lay the state of the case frankly before them, and say: "Will you leave me my liberty, and wait? You will get nothing by putting me into prison, for I have no money of my own, and no friend to come forward and advance it. Give me time, accord me my liberty, and I will endeavour to pay you off by degrees." It was, at any rate, a straightforward way of going to work, and Lionel determined to adopt it. Before mentioning it to his wife, he spoke to Lady Verner.

And then occurred the obstruction. Lady Verner, though she did not oppose the plan, declined to take charge of Sibylla, or to retain her in her house during Lionel's absence.

"I could not take her with me," said Lionel. "There would be more objections to it than one. In the first place, I have not the means; in the second——"

He came to an abrupt pause, and turned the words off. He had been about incautiously to say, "She would most likely, once in London, run me into deeper debt." But Lionel had kept the fact, of her having run him into debt at all, a secret in his own breast. Whatever may have been his wife's faults and failings, he did not make it his business to proclaim them to the world. She proclaimed enough herself, to his grievous chagrin, without his helping to do it.

"Listen, Lionel," said Lady Verner. "You know what my feeling always was with regard to your wife. A closer intercourse has not tended to change that feeling, or to lessen my dislike of her. Now you must forgive my saying this; it is but a passing allusion. Stay on with me as long as you like; stay on for ever, if you will, and she shall stay; but if you leave, she must leave. I should be sorry to have her here, even for a week, without you. In fact, I would not."

"It would be quite impossible for me to take her to London," deliberated Lionel. "I can be there alone at a very trifling cost; but a lady involves so much expense. There must be lodgings, which are expensive; and living, which is expensive also; and attendance, and many other sources of outlay."

"And pray, what should you do, allowing that you went alone, without lodgings and living and attendance, and all the rest of it?" asked Lady Verner. "Take a room at one of their model lodging houses, at half-a-crown a week, and live upon the London air?"

"Not very healthy air for fastidious lungs," observed Lionel, with

a smile. "I don't quite know how I should manage for myself, mother; except that I should take care to keep my expenses within the very narrowest limits that man ever brought them to."

"Not you, Lionel. You were never taught that sort of economy."

"True," he answered. "But the best of all instructors has come to me now—necessity. I wish you would increase my gratitude and my obligation to you by allowing Sibylla to remain here. In a little time, if I have luck, I may make a home for her in London."

"Lionel, *it cannot be*," was the reply of Lady Verner. And he knew when she spoke with that quiet emphasis, that it could not be. "Why should you go to London?" she resumed. "My opinion is, that you will do no good by going there; it is a wild-goose scheme altogether that you have got into your head. I think I could tell you a better."

"What is yours?"

"Remain contentedly here with me until the return of Colonel Tempest. He may even now be on his road home. He will no doubt be able to get you some civil appointment in one of the Presidencies; he has influence here with the people that have to do with India. That will be the best plan, Lionel. You are always wishing you could go abroad. Stay here quietly until he comes; I should like you to stay, and I will put up with your wife."

Some allusion in the words brought a flush to Lionel's cheeks. "I cannot reconcile it to my conscience, mother, to remain on here, a burthen upon your small income."

"But it is not a burthen, Lionel," she said. "It is rather a help."

"How can that be?" he asked.

"So long as Jan pays."

"So long as Jan pays!" echoed Lionel, in astonishment. "Does Jan—pay?"

"Yes, he does. I thought you knew it? Jan came here the day you arrived—don't you remember it, when he had the pins in his shirt? Decima had invited him to dinner, and he came in ten minutes before it, and called me out of the room here, where I was with Lucy. The first thing he did was to tumble into my lap a roll of banknotes, which he had been to Heartbury to get. A hundred and forty pounds; the result of his savings since he joined Dr. West in partnership. The next thing he said was, that all his own share of the profits of the practice he should bring to me, to make up for the cost of yourself and Sibylla. Jan said he had proposed that you should go to him; but Sibylla would not consent to it."

Lionel's veins coursed on hotly. Jan slaving and working for him!

"I never knew this," he cried.

"I am sure I thought you did," said Lady Verner. "I supposed it to have been a prearranged thing between you and Jan. Lionel," looking up into his face with an expression of care and lowering her voice, "but for that hundred and forty pounds, I don't see how I could have gone on. You had been very liberal to me, but somehow debt upon debt seemed to come in, and I was growing quite embarrassed. Jan's money set me partially straight. My dear—as you see you are no 'burthen,' as you call it, you will give up this London scheme, will you not, and remain on?"

"I suppose I must," mechanically answered Lionel, who seemed buried in thought.

He did suppose he must. He was literally without money, and his intention had been to ask the loan of a twenty-pound note from generous Jan, to carry him to London, and keep him there while he turned himself round, and saw what could be done. How could he ask Jan now? There was little doubt that Jan had left himself as void of ready money as he, Lionel, was. Dr. West's was not a business where patients paid their guinea fee, two or three dozen patients a day. Dr. West (or Jan for him) had to doctor his patients for a year, and send in his modest bill at the end of it, very often waiting another year before the bill was paid. Sibylla on his hands, and no money, he did not see how he was to get to London.

"But just think of it," resumed Lady Verner. "Jan's savings for nearly three years of practice to amount only to a hundred and forty pounds! I questioned him pretty sharply, asking him what on earth he could have done with his money, and he acknowledged that he had given a good deal away. He said Miss West had borrowed some, the doctor kept her so short. Then Jan, it seems, forgot to put down the expenses of the horse to the general account, and that had to come out of his pocket. Another thing he acknowledged to having done. When he finds the poor can't conveniently pay their bills, he crosses it off in the book, and finds the money himself. He has no common sense, you know, Lionel; and never had."

Lionel caught up his hat, and went out in the moment's impulse, seeking Jan. Jan was in the surgery alone, making up pills, packing up medicines, answering callers; doing, in fact, Master Cheese's work. Master Cheese had a headache, and was groaning dismally in consequence in an arm-chair, in front of Miss Deb's sitting-room fire, and sipping some hot elder wine, with toasted sippets in it, which he had assured Miss Deb was a sovereign remedy, though it might not be generally known, for keeping off sickness.

"Jan," said Lionel, going straight up, and grasping him by the hand; "what am I to say to you? I did not know, until ten minutes ago, what it is that you are doing for me."

Jan put down a pill-box he held, and looked at Lionel. "What am I doing for you?" he asked.

"I speak of this money that I find you have handed to my mother. Of the money you have undertaken to hand to her."

"Law, is that all?" said Jan, taking up the pill-box again, and biting one of the pills in two to test its quality. "I thought you were going to tell me I had sent you poison, or something; coming in like that."

"Jan, I can never repay you. The money I may, sometime; I hope I shall: the debt of gratitude, never."

"There's nothing to repay," returned Jan, with composure. "As long as I have meat and drink and clothes, what do I want with extra money? You are heartily welcome to it, Lionel."

"You are working your days away, Jan, and for no benefit to yourself. I am reaping it."

"A man can but work," responded Jan. "I like work, for my part; I wouldn't be without it. If old West came home and said he'd take all the patients for a week, and give me a holiday, I should only set on and pound. Look here," pointing to the array on the counter, "I have done more work in two hours than Cheese gets through in a week."

Lionel could not help smiling. Jan went on:

"I don't work for the sake of making money, but because work is life's business, and I like work for its own sake. If I got no money by it, I should work. Don't think about the money, Lionel: while it lay in that bank where was the use of it? Better for my mother to have it, than for me to be hoarding it up."

"Jan, did it never strike you that it might be well to make some provision for contingencies? Old age, say; or sudden deprivation of strength, through accident or other cause? If you give away all you might save for yourself, what should you do were the evil day to come?"

Jan looked at his arms. "I am tolerably strong," said he; "feel me. My head's all right, and my limbs are all right. If I should be deprived of strength before my time, I dare say God, in taking it, would find some means just to keep me from want."

The answer was delivered in the most straightforward simplicity. Lionel looked at him until his eyes grew moist.

"A pretty fellow I should be, to hoard up money while any one else wanted it!" continued Jan. "You and Sibylla make yourselves comfortable, Lionel, that's all."

They were interrupted by the entrance of John Massingbird and his pipe. John appeared to find time hang rather heavily on his hands: *he* could not say that work was the business of his life. He might be seen lounging about Deerham at all hours of the day and

night, smoking and gossiping. Jan often got honoured with a visit. Mr. Massingbird of Verner's Pride was not a whit altered from Mr. Massingbird of nowhere: John favoured the tap-rooms as much as he had ever favoured them.

"The very man I wanted to see!" cried he, giving Lionel a hearty slap on the shoulder. "I want to talk to you a bit on a matter of business. Will you come up to Verner's Pride?"

"When?" asked Lionel.

"This evening, if you will. Come to dinner. Only our two selves."

"Very well," replied Lionel. And he went out of the surgery, leaving John Massingbird talking to his brother.

"On business," John Massingbird had said. Was it to ask him about the mesne profits?—when he could refund them?—to tell him he would be sued, unless he did refund them? Lionel did not know: but he had been expecting John Massingbird to take some such steps.

In going back home, choosing the near way across the fields, as Jan often did, Lionel suddenly came upon Mrs. Peckaby, seated very disconsolately on the stump of a tree. To witness her thus, off the watch for the white animal that might be arriving before her door, surprised Lionel.

"I'm a'most sick of it, sir," she said. "I'm sick to the heart with looking and watching. My brain gets weary and my eyes gets tired. The white quadruple don't come, and Peckaby's a-rowing at me everlasting. I'm come out here for a bit of peace."

"Don't you think it would be better to give the white donkey up for a bad job, Mrs. Peckaby?"

"Give it up!" she uttered aghast. "Give up going to New Jerusalem on a white donkey! No, sir, that would be a misfortune in life!"

Lionel smiled sadly as he left her.

"There are worse misfortunes in life, Mrs. Peckaby, than not going to New Jerusalem on a white donkey."

Lionel Verner went to Verner's Pride at the appointed time, and dined with its master. After dinner, John Massingbird filled his short pipe. He had been regaling Lionel with choice anecdotes of his Australian life, laughing ever: but not a syllable had he broached yet about the "business" he had put forth as the plea for the invitation to Lionel. The anecdotes did not raise the social features of that far-off colony in Mr. Verner's estimation. But he laughed with John: laughed as merrily as his heavy heart would allow him.

It was quite a wintry day, telling of the passing autumn. The skies were leaden; the dead leaves rustled on the paths; and the sighing wind swept through the trees with a mournful sound. Void

of brightness, of hope, it all looked, as did Lionel Verner's fortunes. Only a few short weeks ago he had been in John Massingbird's place, in the very chair that *he* now sat in, never expecting to be removed from it during life. And now!—what a change!

"Why don't you smoke, Lionel?" asked John, lighting his own pipe. "You did not care to smoke in the old days, I remember."

"I never cared for it," replied Lionel.

"I can tell you that you would have cared for it, had you been knocked about as I have. Tobacco's meat and drink to a fellow at the diggings: as it is to a sailor and a soldier."

"Not to all soldiers," observed Lionel. "My father never smoked an ounce of tobacco in his life. I have heard them say so. And he saw some service."

"Every man to his liking," returned John Massingbird. "Folks preach about tobacco being an acquired taste! It's all bosh. Babies come into the world with a liking for it, I know. Talking about your father, would you like to have that portrait of him that hangs in the large drawing-room? You can if you like. I'm sure you have more right to it than I."

"Thank you," replied Lionel. "I should very much like it, if you will give it me."

"What a fastidious chap you are, Lionel!" cried John Massingbird, puffing vigorously; for the pipe was turning refractory, and would not keep alight. "There are lots of things you have left behind you here, that I, in your place, should have marched off without asking."

"The things are yours. That portrait of my father belonged to my Uncle Stephen, and he made no exception in its favour when he willed Verner's Pride, and all it contained, away from me. In legal right, I was at liberty to touch nothing, beyond my personal effects."

"Liberty be hanged!" responded John. "You are over-fastidious; always were. Your father was the same, I know: can see it in his likeness. I should say, by the look of that, he was too much of a gentleman for a soldier."

Lionel smiled. "Some of our soldiers are the most refined gentlemen on the world's soil."

"I can't tell how they retain their refinement, then, amid the rough-and-ready of camp life. I know I lost all I had at the diggings."

Lionel laughed outright at the notion of John Massingbird's losing his refinement at the diggings. He never had any to lose. John joined in the laugh.

"Lionel, old boy, do you know I always liked you, with all your refinement; and it's a quality that never found great favour

with me. I liked you better than I liked poor Fred: and that's the truth."

Lionel made no reply, and John Massingbird smoked for a few minutes in silence, and filled his wine-glass. Presently he began again.

"I say, what made you go and marry Sibylla?"

Lionel lifted his eyes. But John Massingbird resumed, before he had time to speak.

"She's not worth a button. Now you need not fly out, old chap. I am not passing my opinion on your wife; wouldn't presume to do such a thing; but on my cousin. Surely I may find fault with my cousin, if I like! Why did you marry her?"

"Why does any one else marry?" returned Lionel.

"But why did you marry *her?* A sickly, fractious thing! I saw enough of her in the old days. There! be quiet! I have done. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have asked you to come here to your old home; you and I should jog along together first-rate. But Sibylla bars it. She may be a model of a wife; I don't insinuate to the contrary, take you note, Mr. Verner; but she's not exactly a model of temper, and Verner's Pride wouldn't be big enough to hold her and me. Would you have taken up your abode with me, had you been a free man?"

"I cannot tell," replied Lionel. "It is a question that cannot arise now."

"No. Sibylla stops it. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"That I cannot tell. I should like an appointment abroad, if I could get one. I did think of going to London, and looking about me a bit; but I am not sure that I shall do so just yet."

"I say, Lionel," resumed John Massingbird, sinking his voice, but speaking in a joking sort of way, "how do you mean to pay your debts? I hear you have a few."

"I have a good many, one way or another."

"Wipe them off," said John.

"I wish I could wipe them off."

"There's nothing more easy," returned John, in his free manner. "Get the whitewash brush to work. The insolvency court has its friendly doors ever open."

The colour came into Lionel's face. A Verner *there!* He quietly shook his head. "I dare say I shall find a way of paying sometime, if the people will only wait."

"Sibylla helped you to a good part of the score, didn't she? People are saying so. Just like her!"

"When I complain of my wife, it will be quite time enough for other people to begin," said Lionel. "When I married Sibylla, I

took her with her virtues and her faults; and I am ready to defend both."

"All right. I'd rather you had the right of defending them than I," said incorrigible John. "Look here, Lionel: I got you up here to-day to talk about the estate. Will you take the management of it?"

"Of this estate?" replied Lionel, scarcely understanding.

"Deuce a bit of any other could I offer you. Things are all at sixes-and-sevens already: they are chaos; they are purgatory. That's our word out yonder, Lionel, to express the ultimatum of all evil. Matiss comes and bothers; the tenants, one and another, come and bother; Roy comes and bothers. What with it all, I'm fit to bar the outer doors. Roy, you know, thought I should put him into power again! No, no, Mr. Roy: Fred might have done it, but I never will. I have paid him well for the services he rendered me: but put him into power—no. Altogether, things are getting into inextricable confusion; I can't look to them, and I want a manager. Will you take it, Lionel? I'll give you five-hundred a year."

The sum quite startled Lionel. It was far more than he should have supposed John Massingbird would offer to any manager. Matiss would do it for a fourth. *Should* he take it?

He sat, twirling his wine-glass in his fingers. There was a soreness of spirit to get over, and it could not be done all in a moment. To become a servant (indeed it was no better) on the land that had once been his; that ought to be his now, by the law of right—a servant to John Massingbird! Could he bend to it? John smoked, and sat watching him.

He thought of the position of his wife; he thought of the encumbrance on his mother; he thought of his brother Jan, and what *he* had done; he thought of his own very unsatisfactory prospects. Was *this* putting his shoulder to the wheel, as he had resolved to do, thus to hesitate on a quibble of pride? Down, down with his rebellious spirit! Let him be a man in the sight of Heaven!

He turned to John Massingbird, his brow clear, his eye serene. "I will take it, and thank you," he said in steady, cheerful tones.

"Then let's have some grog on the strength of it," was that gentleman's answer. "Tynn says the worry nearly took my mother's life out of her during the time she managed the estate; and it would take it out of mine. If I kept it in my own hands, it would go to the dogs in a twelvemonth. And you'd not thank me for that, Lionel. You are the next heir."

"You may take a wife yet."

"A wife for me!" he shouted. "No, thank you. I know the value of them too well for that. Give me my liberty, and you may

have the wives. Lionel, the office had better be in the study as it used to be: you can come up here of a day. I'll turn the drawing-room into my smoking den. If there are any leases or other deeds missing, you must get them drawn out again. I'm glad it's settled."

Lionel declined the grog; but he remained on, talking things over. John Massingbird sat in a cloud of smoke, drinking Lionel's share as well as his own, and listening to the rain, which had begun to patter against the window panes.

CHAPTER LIX.

GOING TO NEW JERUSALEM.

AND now we must pay a visit to Mrs. Peckaby: for great events were happening to her on that night.

When Lionel met her in the day, seated on the stump, all disconsolate, she had thrown out a hint that Mr. Peckaby was not habitually in quite so social a mood as he might be. The fact was, Peckaby's patience had run out. And little wonder, either. The man's meals made ready for him in any careless way, often not made ready at all, and his wife spending her time in sighing and moaning and looking out for the white donkey! You, my readers, may deem this a rather far-fetched episode in the story; you may deem it next to impossible that any woman should be so ridiculously foolish, or could be so imposed upon: but I am only relating to you the strict truth. The facts occurred precisely as are being narrated, and not long ago. I have neither added to the facts nor taken from them.

Mrs. Peckaby finished out her sitting on the stump under the grey skies. The skies were greyer when she rose to go home. She found on her arrival that Peckaby had been in to his tea; that is, he had been in, hoping to partake of that social meal; but finding no preparation made for it, he had a little relieved his mind by pouring a pail of water over the kitchen fire, thereby putting the fire out and causing considerable damage to the fire-irons and appurtenances generally, which would give Mrs. Peckaby some little work to remedy.

"The brute!" she ejaculated, putting her foot into the slop on the floor, and taking a general view of things. "Oh, if I was but off!"

"My patience, what a mess!" exclaimed Polly Dawson, who happened to be going by, and had turned in for a gossip. "Whatever has done it?"

"Whatever has done it? why, that wretch Peckaby," retorted the aggrieved wife. "Don't you never get married, Polly Dawson, if

you want to keep on the right side of the men. They be the worst animals in all creation. Many a poor woman's life has been aggrivated out of her."

"If I do get married, I shan't begin the aggrivation by wanting to be off to them saints at New Jerusalem," impudently returned Polly Dawson.

Mrs. Peckaby received it meekly. What with the long-continued disappointment, the perpetual "aggrivations" of Peckaby, and the prospect of work before her arising from the gratuitous pail of water, she was feeling unusually cowed down.

"I wish I was a hundred mile off," she cried. "Nobody's fate was ever so hard as mine."

"It'll take you a good two hours to red up," observed Polly Dawson. "I'd rather you had to do it than me."

"I'd see it further—before it should take me two hours—and Peckaby with it," retorted Mrs. Peckaby, reviving to a touch of temper. "I shall but give it a lick and a promise; just mop up the wet, and dry the grate, and get a bit of fire alight. T'other things may go."

Polly Dawson departed, and Mrs. Peckaby set to her work. By dint of some trouble, she contrived to obtain a cup of tea for herself after a while, and then she sat on disconsolately as before. Night came on, and she had ample time to indulge her ruminations.

Peckaby had not come in. Mrs. Peckaby concluded he was solacing himself at that social rendezvous, the Plough and Harrow, and would come home in a state of beer. Between nine and ten he entered—hours were early in Deerham—and to Mrs. Peckaby's surprise, he was not only sober, but social.

"It has turned out a pouring wet night," cried he. And the mood was so unwonted, especially after the episode of the wet grate, that Mrs. Peckaby was astonished into answering pleasantly.

"Will ye have some bread and cheese?" asked she.

"I don't mind if I do. Chuff gave me a piece of his bread and bacon at eight o'clock, so I ain't over-hungry."

Mrs. Peckaby brought forth the loaf and the cheese, and Peckaby cut himself some and ate it. Then he went upstairs. She stayed to put the eatables away, raked out the fire, and followed. Peckaby was already in bed. To get into it was not a very ceremonious proceeding with him, as it is not with many others. There was no superfluous attire to throw off, there was no hindering time with ablutions, there were no prayers. Mrs. Peckaby favoured the same convenient mode, and she had just put the candle out, when some noise struck upon her ear.

It came from the road outside. They slept at the back, the front room having been the one let to Brother Jarrum; but in those

small houses, at that quiet hour, noises in the road were heard as distinctly back as front. There was a sound of talking, and then came a modest knock at Peckaby's street door.

Mrs. Peckaby went to the front room, opened the casement, and looked out. To say that her heart leaped into her mouth, would be a most imperfect figure of speech to describe the state of feeling that rushed over her. In the rainy obscurity of the night she could discern something white drawn up to the door, and the figures of two men standing by it. The only wonder was, that she did not leap out; she might have done so, had the window been large enough.

"Do Susan Peckaby live here?" inquired a gruff voice, that sounded as if it were muffled.

"Oh, dear good gentlemen, yes!" she responded, trembling with excitement. "Please what is it?"

"The white donkey's come to take her to New Jerusalem."

With a shriek of joy that might have been heard all the way up Clay Lane, Mrs. Peckaby tore back to her chamber.

"Peckaby," she cried, "Peckaby, the thing's come at last! The blessed animal that's to bear me off. I always said it would."

Peckaby—probably from drowsiness—made no immediate response. Mrs. Peckaby stooped down to the low bed, and shook him well by the shoulder.

"It's the white quadruple, Peckaby, come at last!"

Peckaby growled out something that she was in a state of too great excitement to hear. She lighted the candle; she flung on some of the things she had taken off; she ran back to the front room, lest the messengers, brute and human, should have departed, and put her head out at the casement again, all in the utmost fever of agitation.

"A minute or two yet, good gentlemen, please! I'm almost ready. I've only to get out my purple gownd."

"All right, missus," was the muffled answer.

The "purple gownd" was kept in this very ex-room of Brother Jarrum's, hid in a safe place between some sheets of newspaper. Had Mrs. Peckaby kept it open to the view of Peckaby, there's no saying what grief the robe might not have come to, ere this. Peckaby, in his tantrums, would not have been likely to spare it. She put it on, her trembling fingers scarcely able to accomplish the task. That it was full loose for her she was prepared to find: she had grown thin with fretting. Then she put on a shawl; next, her bonnet; last, some green leather gloves. The shawl was black, with worked coloured corners,—a thin shawl that hardly covered her shoulders; and the bonnet was of straw, trimmed with pink ribbons—the toilette which had long been prepared.

"Good-bye, Peckaby," said she, going in when she was ready. "You've said many a time as you wished I was off, and now you have got your wish. But I don't want to part nothing but friends."

"Good-bye," returned Peckaby, in a hearty tone, as he turned himself round on his bed. "Give my love to the saints."

To find him in this accommodating humour was more than she had bargained for. A doubt had crossed her sometimes, whether, when the white donkey did come, there might not arise a battle with Peckaby, ere she should get off. This apparently civil feeling on his part awoke a more social one on hers; and a qualm of conscience darted across her, suggesting that she might have made him a better wife had she been so disposed. "He might have shook hands with me," was her parting thought, as she unlocked the street door.

The donkey was waiting outside with all the patience for which donkeys are renowned. It had been drawn up under a shelter at a little distance, to be out of the rain. Its two conductors were muffled up, as befitted the inclemency of the night, just as their voices had appeared muffled also. Mrs. Peckaby was not sufficiently in her sober senses to ask whether they were Brothers from New Jerusalem, or whether the style of costume they favoured might be the prevailing mode in that fashionable city · if so, it was decidedly more useful than elegant, consisting apparently of hop-sacks, doubled over the head and down the back.

"Ready, missus?"

"I be quite ready," she answered, trembling with delight. "There ain't no saddle!" she called out, as the donkey was trotted forward.

"You won't want a saddle: these New Jerusalem animals bain't like ordinary 'uns. Jump on him, missus."

Mrs. Peckaby was so exceedingly tall, that she had not far to jump. She took her seat sideways, settled her gown, and caught up the bridle, which one of the men put into her hands. He turned the donkey round, and set it going with a smack; the other helped by crying "Gee-ho!"

Up Clay Lane she proceeded in triumph. The skies were dark, and the rain came soaking down; but Mrs. Peckaby's heart was too warm to dwell on temporary inconveniences. If a thought crossed her mind that the beauty of the pink ribbons might be marred by the storm, so as somewhat to dim the glory of her entrance into the city and introduction to the saints, she drove it away again. Trouble had no place in her present frame of mind. The gentlemen in the hop-sacks continued to attend her; the one leading the donkey, the other walking behind and cheering the animal on with periodical gee-ho's.

"I suppose as it's a long way, sir?" asked Mrs. Peckaby, breaking the silence, and addressing the conductor.

"Middlin'," replied he.

"And how do we get over the sea, please, sir?" asked she again.

"The woyage is pervided for, missus," was the short and satisfactory response. "Brother Jarrum took care of that when he sent us."

Her heart went into a glow at the name. And those envious disbelievers in Deerham had cast all sorts of disparaging accusations upon the Brother, openly expressing their opinion that he had gone off purposely without her, and that she'd never hear of him again!

Arrived at the top of Clay Lane, the road was crossed, and the donkey was led down a turning towards the lands of Sir Rufus Hautley. It may have occurred to Mrs. Peckaby to wonder that the highway was not taken, instead of an unfrequented by-path that only led to fields and a wood; but, if so, she said nothing. Had the white donkey taken her to a gravel-pit and pitched headlong into it with her, she would have deemed, in her blind faith, that it was the right road to New Jerusalem.

It was a long way, over those wet fields. If the Brothers and the donkey partook of the saintly nature of the inhabitants of Salt Lake City, possibly they did not find it a weary one. Mrs. Peckaby certainly did not. She was rapt in a glowing vision of the honours and delights that would welcome her at her journey's end;—so rapt, that she and the donkey had been for some little time in one of the narrow paths of the wood before she missed her two conductors.

It caused Mrs. Peckaby to pull the bridle, and cry "Wo-ho!" to the donkey. She had an idea that they might have struck into the wrong path, for this one appeared to be growing narrower and narrower. The wood was intersected with paths, but only a few of them led right through it. She pulled up, and turned her head the way she had come, but was unable to distinguish anything, except that she was in the heart of the wood.

"Be you behind, gentlemen?" she called out.

There was no reply. Mrs. Peckaby waited a bit, thinking they might have lagged unwittingly, and then called out again, with the same result.

"It's very curious!" thought Mrs Peckaby.

She was certainly in a dilemma. Without her conductors, she knew no more how to get to New Jerusalem than she knew how to get to the new moon. She might find her way through the wood, by one path or another; but, once on the other side, she had no idea which road to turn the donkey to—north, south, east, or west. She thought she would go back and look after them.

But there was some difficulty in doing this. The path had grown so narrow that the donkey could not easily be turned. She slipped off him, tied the bridle to a tree, and ran back as fast as the obscurity of the path allowed her, calling out to the gentlemen.

The more she ran and the more she called, the less there appeared to be any one to respond to it. Utterly nonplused, she at length returned to the donkey—that is, to the spot, so far as she could judge, where she had left it. But the donkey was gone.

Was Mrs. Peckaby awake or asleep? Was the past blissful dream—when she was being borne in triumph to New Jerusalem—only an imaginary one? Was her present predicament real? Which *was* imagination and which was fact? For the last hour she had been enjoying the consummation of all her hopes; now she seemed no nearer their fruition than she had been a year ago. The white donkey was gone, the Brothers were gone, and she was alone in the middle of a wood, two miles from home, on a wet night. Mrs. Peckaby had heard of enchantments, and began to think she must have been subjected to some sort of enchantment now.

She rubbed her eyes; she pinched her arms. Was she in her senses or not? Surely never was such a situation heard of! The cup of hope presented to her lips, only to vanish again—she could not tell how—and leave no sign. A very disagreeable doubt—not yet a suspicion—began to dawn over Mrs. Peckaby. Had she been made the subject of a practical joke?

She might have flung the doubt from her, but for a distant sound that came faintly on her ears—the sound of covert laughter. Her doubt turned to conviction. Her face became hot; her heart, but for anger, would have grown sick with disappointment. Her conductors and the donkey were retreating, having played their joke out! Two certainties forced themselves upon her mind. One, that Peckaby and his friends had planned it; she felt sure now that the biggest of the "Brothers" had been no one but Chuff, the blacksmith: the other certainty was, that she should never be sent for to New Jerusalem in any other way. Why it should have been, Mrs. Peckaby could not have told, then or afterwards; but the positive conviction that Brother Jarrum *had* been false, that the story of sending for her on a white donkey had only been invented to keep her quiet, fixed itself in her mind at that moment in the lonely wood. She sank down amidst the trees and sobbed bitterly.

But all the tears that the world ever shed could not bring her nearer to New Jerusalem, or improve her present situation. After a while she had the sense to remember that. She rose from the ground, turned her gown up over her shoulders, found her way out of the wood, and set off on her walk back again in a very humble frame of mind, arriving home as the clock was striking two.

She could make no one hear. She knocked at the door, she knocked at the window, gently at first, then louder; she called and called, but there came no answer. Some of the neighbours, aroused by the unwonted disturbance, came peeping at their windows. At length Peckaby opened his; thrusting his head out at the very casement from which Mrs. Peckaby had beheld the deceitful vision earlier in the night.

"Who's there?" called out Peckaby.

"It's me, Peckaby," was the answer, delivered in a forlorn tone. "Come down and open the door."

"Who's 'me'?" asked Peckaby.

"It's me," repeated Mrs. Peckaby, looking up.

And what with her height and the low casement, their faces were really not many inches apart; but yet Peckaby appeared not to know her.

"You be off, will you!" retorted he. "A pretty thing, if tramps are to come to decent folks' doors and knock 'em up like this. Who's door did you take it for?"

"It's me!" screamed Mrs. Peckaby. "Don't you know me? Come and undo the door, and let me come in. I'm sopping."

"Know you? How should I know you? Who are you?"

"Good Heavens, Peckaby! you must know me. Ain't I your wife?"

"My wife! Not a bit on't. You needn't come here with that gammon, missis, whoever you be. My wife's gone off to New Jerusalem on a white donkey."

He slammed to the casement. Mrs. Peckaby, what with the rain and what with disappointment, burst into tears. In the same moment, sundry other casements opened, and all the heads in the vicinity—including the blacksmith Chuff's, and Mrs. Chuff's—were thrust out to condole with their neighbour, Mrs. Peckaby.

"Had she been and come back a'ready?" "Did she get tired of the saints so soon as this—or did they get tired of her?" "What sort of a city was it?" "Which was most plentiful—geese or sage?" "How many wives, besides herself, had the gentleman-saint that *she* chose?" "Who took care of the babies?" "Did they have many public dances?" "Were veils for the bonnets all the go?" "Was it a paradise or wasn't it?" "And how was Brother Jarrum?"

Amongst the many questions asked, these came prominently tingling on the ears of the unhappy Mrs. Peckaby. Too completely prostrated with events to retort, she suddenly dropped her gown, that she had kept so carefully turned, and put up both her hands to her face. Then came a real, genuine question from the next door casement—Mrs. Green's.

"Ain't that your plum-coloured gownd? What's come to it?"

Mrs. Peckaby, somewhat aroused, glanced at the gown in haste. What *had* come to it? Patches of dead-white, not unlike paint, covered it about on all sides, especially behind. The shawl had caught some of the white, too, and the green leather gloves looked as though they had been whitewashed. Her beautiful gown! laid by so long!—what on earth had ruined it like that?

Chuff, the blacksmith, gave a great grin from his window. "Surely that there donkey never was painted white!" quoth he.

That it had been painted white, and with very wet paint too, there could be little doubt. Some poor donkey, humble in his coat of grey, converted into a fine white animal for the occasion, by Peckaby and Chuff and their cronies. Mrs. Peckaby sobbed with mortification, and drummed frantically on her house door. A chorus of laughter echoed from all sides, and Peckaby's casement flew open again.

"Will you stop that there knocking, then?" roared Peckaby. "Disturbing a man's night's rest."

"I *will* come in then, Peckaby," she stormed, plucking up a little spirit in her desperation. "I'm your wife; you know I am; and I will come in."

"My good woman, what's took you?" cried Peckaby, in a tone of compassion. "You ain't no wife of mine. My wife's miles on her road by this time. She's off to New Jerusalem on a white donkey."

A new actor came up to the scene. No other than Jan Verner. Jan had been sitting up with some poor patient, and was now going home. To describe his surprise when he saw the windows crowded with nightcapped heads, and Mrs. Peckaby in her dripping discomfort, outward and inward, would be a difficult task. Peckaby himself undertook the explanation, in which he was aided by Chuff; and Jan sat himself down on the public pump, and laughed till he was hoarse.

"Come, Peckaby, let her in," cried he, before he went away.

"Let her in!" echoed Peckaby. "That would be a go! What would the saints say? They'd be for prosecuting of her for bigamy. If she's gone over to them, sir, she can't belong legally to me."

Jan laughed, and Mrs. Peckaby sobbed. Chuff began calling out that the best remedy for white paint was turpentine.

"Come down, Peckaby, and open the door," said Jan, rising. "She'll catch an illness if she stops here in her wet clothes, and I shall have a month's work attending on her. Come!"

"Well, sir, to oblige you, I will," returned the man. "But let me ever catch her snivelling after them saints again, that's all! They should have her if they liked; I'd not."

"You hear, Mrs. Peckaby," said Jan, in her ear. "I'd let the saints alone for the future, if I were you."

"I mean to, sir," she meekly answered between her sobs.

Peckaby opened the door, and she bounded in. The casements closed to the chorus of subsiding laughter, and the echoes of Jan's footsteps died away in the distance.

CHAPTER LX.

SIBYLLA.

SIBYLLA VERNER sat at the window of her sitting-room in the twilight: a cold evening in early winter. Sibylla was in a temper. It was nothing unusual for her to be in a temper now; but she was in a worse one than usual this evening. Sibylla felt the difference between Verner's Pride and Deerham Court. She lived only in excitement; she cared only for gaiety. In removing to Deerham Court she had gone readily, believing that she should there find a large portion of the gaiety she had been accustomed to at Verner's Pride; that she should, at any rate, be living with the appliances of wealth about her, and should go out a great deal with Lady Verner. She had not bargained for Lady Verner's establishment being reduced to simplicity and quietness, for her laying down her carriage and discharging her men-servants and selling her horses and living again the life of a retired gentlewoman. Yet all these changes had come to pass, and Sibylla's spirit turned restive. She had everything that any reasonable mind could possibly desire, every comfort: but quiet comfort and Sibylla's taste did not accord. Her husband was out a great deal at Verner's Pride and on the estate. As he had resolved, over John Massingbird's dinner-table, so he was doing—putting his shoulder to the wheel. He had never looked after things as he was looking after them now. To be master of Verner's Pride was one thing; to be the paid manager of Verner's Pride was another: and Lionel found every hour of his time occupied. His was no eye-service; his conscience was engaged in his work, and he did it efficiently.

Sibylla still sat at the window, looking out into the twilight. Decima stood near the fire in a thoughtful mood. Lady Verner had gone out to dinner. Lucy was downstairs in the drawing-room, at the piano; they could hear her soft playing as they sat there in silence. Presently she came in and knelt down before the fire: she was very cold. The window on this side the house overlooked the road which led to Sir Rufus Hautley's. A carriage, apparently

closely shut up, so far as could be seen in the dusk, was bowling towards the village.

"There's Sir Rufus Hautley's carriage," said Lucy, who was then at the window. "I suppose he is going out to dinner."

Decima looked out. The carriage came sweeping round the point, and turned on its road to the village, as they supposed. In the silence of the room, they could hear its wheels on the frosty road after they had lost sight of it: could hear it bowl before their house and—pull up at the gates.

"It has stopped here!" exclaimed Lucy.

Decima moved quietly back to the fire and sat down. A fancy arose to Lucy that she, Decima, had turned unusually pale. Was it so?—or was it fancy? If it was fancy, why should the fancy have arisen? Intensely pale her face certainly looked as the blaze played upon it.

A few minutes, and one of the servants came in, handing a note to Decima.

"Bring lights," said Decima, in a low tone.

The lights were brought: and then Decima's agitation was apparent. Her hands shook as she broke the seal of the letter. Lucy gazed in surprise; Sibylla, somewhat aroused from her own grievances, gazed in curiosity.

"Desire the carriage to wait," said Decima, when she had read the note.

"It is waiting, Miss Decima. The servants said they had orders to do so."

Decima crushed the note into her pocket as well as her agitation would allow her, and left the room. What could have occurred, thus to agitate calm and stately Decima? Before Lucy and Mrs. Verner had recovered their surprise she was back again, dressed to go out.

"I am sorry to leave you so abruptly, as mamma is not here," she said. "I dare say Lionel will be in to dinner. If not, you must for once entertain each other."

"But where are you going?" cried Mrs. Verner.

"To Sir Rufus Hautley's. He wishes to see me."

"What does he want with you?" continued Sibylla.

"I do not know," replied Decima.

She left the room and went down to the carriage, which had waited for her. Mrs. Verner and Lucy heard it drive away again as quickly as it had driven up. As it turned the corner and pursued its way up the road, past the window they were looking from, but at some distance from it, they fancied they saw Decima within it, looking out at them.

"Sir Rufus is taken ill," said old Catherine to them, by way of

news. "The servants say it's feared he won't live through the night. Mr. Jan is there, and Dr. Hayes."

"But what can he want with Miss Verner?" reiterated Sibylla.

Catherine shook her head. She had not the remotest idea.

Lionel Verner did not come in to dinner, and they went down without him. His non-appearance did not improve the temper of his wife. It had occurred lately that Lionel did not always get home to dinner. Sometimes, when detained at Verner's Pride, he would take it with John Massingbird; if out on the estate, and unable to reach home in time, he would take something when he came in. Her fractious state of mind did not tend to soothe a headache she had complained of earlier in the day. Every half-hour that passed without her husband's entrance made her worse in all ways; and about nine o'clock she went up to her sitting-room and lay down on the sofa, saying that her temples were splitting.

Lucy followed her. Lucy thought she must really be ill. She could not understand that any one should be so fractious, except from pain. "I will bathe your temples," she gently said.

Sibylla did not appear to care whether her temples were bathed or not. Lucy brought some water in a basin and two thin handkerchiefs, wringing out one, and placing it on Mrs. Verner's forehead, kneeling to her task. That her temples were throbbing and her head hot, was certain: the handkerchief was no sooner on than Lucy had to exchange it for the other.

"It is Lionel's fault," suddenly burst forth Sibylla.

"His fault?" returned Lucy. "How can it be his fault?"

"What business has he to stop out?"

"But if he cannot help it?" returned Lucy. "The other evening, don't you remember, Mr. Verner said when he came in, that he could not help being late sometimes now."

"*You* need not defend him," said Sibylla. "It seems to me that you are all ready to take his part against me."

Lucy made no reply. An assertion more unfounded could not have been uttered. At that moment Lionel's step was heard on the stairs. He came in, looking fagged and tired.

"Up here this evening!" he exclaimed, laying down a paper or parchment which he had in his hand. "Catherine says my mother and Decima are out. Why, Sibylla, what is the matter?"

Sibylla dashed the handkerchief from her brow as he advanced to her, and rose up, speaking vehemently. The sight of her husband appeared to have brought her ill-temper to a climax.

"Where have you been? Why were you not in to dinner?"

"I could not get home in time. I have been detained."

"It is false," she retorted, her blue eyes flashing fire. "Business.

business! it is always your excuse now! You stay out for no good purpose."

The outbreak startled Lucy. She backed a few paces, looking scared.

"Sibylla!" was all the amazed reply returned by Lionel.

"You leave me here, hour after hour, to solitude and tears, while you are out, taking your pleasure! I have all the endurance of our position, and you the enjoyment."

He battled for a moment with his rising feelings; battled for calmness, for forbearance, for strength to bear. There were moments when he was tempted to answer her in her own spirit.

"Pleasure and I have not been very close friends of late, Sibylla," he gravely said. "None can know that better than you. My horse went lame, and I have been leading him these last two hours. I have now to go to Verner's Pride. Something has arisen on which I must see Mr. Massingbird."

"It is false, it is false," reiterated Sibylla. "You are not going to Verner's Pride; you are not going to see Mr. Massingbird. You best know where you are going; but it is not there. It is the old story of Rachel Frost over again."

The words confounded Lionel; both that they were inexplicable, and spoken in passion so vehement.

"What do you say about Rachel Frost?" he asked.

"You know what I say, and what I mean. When Deerham looked far and near for the man who injured Rachel, they little thought they might have found him in Lionel Verner. Lucy Tempest, it is true! He——"

But Lionel had turned imperatively to Lucy, drawing her to the door, which he opened. It was no place for her, a discussion such as this.

"Will you be so kind as to go down and make me a cup of tea, Lucy?" he said in a wonderfully calm tone, considering the provocation he was receiving. Then he closed the door on Lucy, and turned to his wife.

"Sibylla, allow me to request, nay, to insist, that when you have fault to find, or reproach to cast on me, you choose a moment when we are alone. If you have no care for what may be due to me and to yourself, you will do well to bear in mind that something is due to others. Now then, tell me what you mean about Rachel Frost."

"I won't," said Sibylla. "You are killing me," and she burst into tears.

Oh, it was weary work!—weary work for him. Such a wife as this!

"In what way am I killing you?"

"Why do you leave me so much alone?"

"I have undertaken work, and I must do it. But, as to leaving you alone, when I am with you, you scarcely ever give me a civil word."

"You are leaving me now—you are wanting to go to Verner's Pride to-night," she reiterated with strange inconsistency, considering that she had just insinuated he did *not* want to go there.

"I must go there, Sibylla. I have told you why: and I have told you truth. Again I ask you what you meant about Rachel Frost."

Sibylla flung up her hands petulantly. "I won't tell you, I say. And you can't make me. I wish, I *wish* Fred had not died!"

She turned round on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions. Lionel, true to the line of conduct he had marked out for himself, —ever to give her all possible token of respect and affection, whatever provocation she might give him, (and all the more true to it from the very consciousness that the love of his inmost heart grew less hers, and more another's, day by day),—bent over her and spoke kindly. She flung back her hand repellingly towards him, and maintained an obstinate silence. Lionel, sick and weary, at length withdrew, taking up the parchment.

How sick and weary, none, save himself, could know. Lucy Tempest had the tea before her, apparently ready, when he looked into the drawing-room.

"I am going on now to Verner's Pride, Lucy. You can tell my mother so, should she ask after me when she returns. I may be late."

"But you will take some tea, first?" cried Lucy, hastily. "You asked me to make it for you."

He knew he had:—asked her as an excuse to get her from the room.

"I don't care for it," he wearily answered.

"I am sure you are tired," said Lucy. "When did you dine?"

"I have not dined. I have taken nothing since I left home this morning."

"Oh!" she was hastening to the bell. Lionel stopped her, laying his hand upon her arm.

"I could not eat anything, Lucy. Just one cup of tea, if you will."

She returned to the table, poured out the tea, and he drank it standing. Then he turned, and departed. Lucy noticed that he had left the parchment behind him, and ran after him with it, catching him as he was about to close the hall-door. She knew that all such business-looking papers went up to Verner's Pride.

"Did you mean to leave it? Or have you forgotten it?"

He had forgotten it. He took it from her, retaining her hand for a moment. "Lucy, *you* will not misjudge me?" he said in a tone of intense pain.

Lucy looked up at him with a bright smile and a very emphatic shake of the head. She felt by instinct that he alluded to the accusation of his wife, touching Rachel Frost. Lucy misjudge *him!*

"You should have waited to take some dinner," she gaily said. "Take care you don't faint by the way, as that sick patient of Jan's did, the other morning."

Lionel went on. At any rate there was peace outside, if not within: the peace of outward calm. He lifted his hat; he bared his brow, aching with its weight of trouble, to the clear night air; he wondered whether he should have *so* to bear for his whole long life. At the moment of passing the outer gates, Sir Rufus Hautley's carriage drew up, bearing Decima.

Lionel waited to receive her. He helped her out, and gave her his arm to the hall-door. Decima walked with her head bowed.

"You are silent, Decima. Are you sad?"

"Yes," she answered. "Sir Rufus is dead."

"Dead!" echoed Lionel, in very astonishment, for he had heard nothing of the sudden illness.

"It is so," she replied, bursting into tears. "Spasms at the heart, they say. Jan and Dr. Hayes were there, but they could not save him."

CHAPTER LXI.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

THE time went on. Deborah and Amilly West were sitting over the fire in the twilight of a February evening. Their sewing lay on the table: some home dresses they were making for themselves; for they had never too much money to spare for dressmakers with fashionable patterns and fashionable prices. It had grown too dark to work, and they had turned to the fire for a chat, before tea came in, and the gas was lighted.

"I tell you, Amilly, it is of no use playing at concealment, or trying to suppress the truth," Deborah was saying. "She is as surely going as that the other two went: as sure as sure can be. I have always felt that she would go. Mr. Lionel was talking to me only yesterday. He was not satisfied with his brother: at least he thought it as well to act as though he were not satisfied with him: and he was about to ask Dr. Hayes——"

Her voice died away. Master Cheese had come in with a doleful face.

"Miss Deb, I'm sent up to Deerham Hall. There's a bothering note come from Miss Hautley to Jan, about one of the servants, and he says I am to go up and see what it is."

"Well!" returned Miss Deb, wondering why Master Cheese should come in to give her the information. "You couldn't expect Mr. Jan to go up, after being out all day, as he has."

"Folks are sure to go and fall ill at the most untoward hour of the twenty-four," grumbled Master Cheese. "I was just looking forward to a good tea. I feel as empty as possible, after my short dinner. I wish——"

"Short dinner!" echoed Miss Deb, in amazement; at least, it would have been in amazement, but that she was accustomed to these little remarks from the young gentleman. "We had a beautiful piece of roast beef; and I'm sure you ate as much as you chose!"

"There was no pudding or pie," resentfully retorted Master Cheese. "I have felt all the afternoon just as if I should sink: and I couldn't get out to buy anything for myself, because Jan never came in, and the boy stopped out. I wish, Miss Deb, you'd give me a piece of bread-and-jam, as I have to go off without my tea."

"The fact is, Master Cheese, you have jam so often, in one way or another, that there's very little left. It will not last the season out."

"The green gooseberries will be coming on, Miss Deb," was Master Cheese's insinuating reply. "And there's always apples, you know. With plenty of lemon and a clove or two, apples make as good a pudding as anything else."

Miss Deb, always good-natured, went to get him what he had asked for, and Master Cheese took his seat in front of the fire, and toasted his toes.

"There was a great mistake made when you were put to a surgeon," said Miss Amilly, laughing. "You should have gone apprentice to a pastrycook."

"She's a regular fidgety old woman, that Miss Hautley," broke out Master Cheese with temper, passing over Miss Amilly's remark. "It's not two months yet that she has been at the Hall, and she has had one or other of us up six times at least. I wonder what business she had to come to it? The Hall wouldn't have run away before Sir Edmund could get home."

Miss Deb came back with the bread-and-jam; a good thick slice, as the gentleman had requested. To have seen him eating, one would have thought he had had nothing for a week. It disappeared

in no time, and then Master Cheese went out. Deborah West folded up the work, and put things straight generally in the room. Then she sat down again, drawing her chair to the side of the fire.

"I do think that Cheese has a wolf inside him," cried Amilly, with a laugh.

"He is a great gourmand. He said this morning——" began Miss Deb, and then she stopped.

Finding what she was about to say thus brought to a conclusion, Amilly West looked at her sister. Miss Deb's attention was riveted on the door of the room. Her mouth was open, her eyes seemed starting from her head, and her countenance was growing white. Amilly turned her eyes hastily to the same direction, and saw an obscure form filling up the doorway.

Not obscure for long. Amilly, more impulsive than her sister, rose up with a shriek, and darted forward with outstretched arms; Deborah followed.

"My dear father!"

It was no other than Dr. West. He gave them each a cool kiss, walked to the fire and sat down, bidding them not smother him. For some little time they could not get over their surprise or believe their senses. They knew nothing of his intention to return, and had deemed him hundreds of miles away. Question after question they showered down upon him, the result of their amazement. He answered just as much as he chose. He had only come home for a day or so, he said, and did not care that it should be known he was there, to be tormented with a shoal of callers.

Dr. West rose, and made his way to the surgery. It was empty. But the light of a fire from the half-opened door led him to Jan's bedroom. It was a room that would persist in remaining obstinately damp, and Jan, albeit not over-careful of himself, judged it well to have an occasional fire lighted. The room, seen by this light, looked comfortable. The small, low iron bed stood in the far corner: in the opposite corner the bureau, as in Dr. West's time, the door opening to the garden (never used now) between them, at the end of the room. The window was on the side opposite the fire, and there was a table in the middle. Jan was occupied in stirring the fire into a blaze, and its cheerful light flickered on every part of the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Jan."

Jan turned round, poker in hand, and stared amiably. "Law!" cried he. "Who'd have thought it?"

The old word; the word he had learnt at school—law. It was Jan's favourite mode of expressing surprise still, and Lady Verner could never break him of it. He shook hands cordially with Dr. West.

The doctor shut the door, slipping the bolt, and sat down by the fire. Jan cleared a space on the table, which was covered with jars and glass vases, cylinders, and other apparatus, seemingly for chemical purposes, and took his seat there.

The doctor had taken a run home, "making a morning call, as it might be metaphorically observed," he said to Jan. Just to have a sight of home faces, and hear a little home news. Would Mr. Jan give him somewhat of the latter?

Jan did so: touching upon all he could recollect. From John Massingbird's return to Verner's Pride, and the consequent turning out of Mr. Verner and his wife, down to the death of Sir Rufus Hautley: not forgetting the pranks played by the "ghost," and Mrs. Peckaby's foiled expedition to New Jerusalem. Some of these items of intelligence the doctor had heard before, for Jan periodically wrote to him. The doctor looked taller, and stouter, and redder than ever, and as he leaned thoughtfully forward, and the blaze played upon his face, Jan thought how like he was growing to his sister, the late Mrs. Verner.

"Mr. Jan," said the doctor, "it is not right that my nephew, John Massingbird, should enjoy Verner's Pride."

"Of course it's not," answered Jan. "Only things don't go by rights always, you know. It's seldom they do."

"He ought to give it up to Mr. Verner."

"So I told him," said Jan. "*I* should, in his place."

"What did he say?"

"Say? Laughed at me, and called me green."

Dr. West sat thoughtfully pulling his great dark whiskers. Dark as they were, they had yet a tinge of red in the firelight. "It was a curious thing; a very curious thing, that both brothers should die, as was supposed, in Australia," said he. "Better—as things have turned out—that Fred should have turned up afterwards, than John."

"I don't know that," spoke Jan, with his accustomed truth-telling freedom. "The pair were not good for much, but John was the best of them."

"I was thinking of Sibylla," candidly admitted the doctor. "It would have been better for her."

Jan opened his eyes considerably.

"Better for her!—for it to turn out that she had two husbands living? That's logic."

"Dear me, to be sure!" cried the doctor. "I was not thinking of that phase of the affair, Mr. Jan. Is she in spirits?"

"Who? Sibylla? She's fretting herself into her grave."

Dr. West turned his head with a start. "What at? The loss of Verner's Pride?"

"Well, I don't know," said Jan. "She puzzles me. When she was at Verner's Pride, she never seemed satisfied: she was perpetually hankering after excitement—didn't seem to care for Lionel or for anybody else, and kept the house full of people from top to bottom. She has a restless, dissatisfied temper, and it keeps her on the worry. Folks with such tempers know no peace, and let nobody else know any that's about them. A nice life she leads Lionel! Not that *he'd* drop a hint of it. He'd cut out his tongue before he'd speak a word against his wife: he'd rather make her out to be an angel."

"Are they pretty comfortably off for money?" inquired Dr. West, after a pause. "I suppose Mr. Verner must have managed to feather his nest a little before leaving?"

"Not a bit of it," returned Jan. "He was over head and ears in debt. Sibylla helped him to a good portion of it. She went the pace. John Massingbird waives the question of the mesne profits, or Lionel would be in worse embarrassment than he is."

Dr. West looked crestfallen. "What do they live on?" he asked. "Does Lady Verner keep them? She can't have too much for herself now."

"Oh! it's managed somehow," said Jan.

Dr. West sat for some time in silence; pulling his whiskers as before, running his hands through his hair, the large clear blue sapphire ring, which he always wore on his finger, conspicuous. Jan swayed his legs about, and waited to afford any further information. Presently the doctor turned to him, a charming expression of confidence on his face.

"Mr. Jan, I am in great hopes that you will do me a little favour. I have temporary need of a trifle of pecuniary aid—some slight debts which have grown upon me abroad," he added carelessly, with a short cough—"and, knowing your good heart, I have resolved to apply to you. If you can oblige me with a couple of hundred pounds or so, I'll give you my acknowledgment, and return it punctually as soon as I am able."

"I'd give it you with all the pleasure in life, if I had it," heartily replied Jan. "But I have not."

"My dear Mr. Jan! Not got it! You must have quite a nice little nest of savings laid by in the bank! I know you never spend a shilling on yourself."

"All I had in the bank, and what I have drawn since, has been handed to my mother. I wanted Lionel and Sibylla to come here: I and Miss Deb arranged it all, and in that case I should have given the money to Miss Deb. But Sibylla refused; she would not come here, she would not go anywhere but to Lady Verner's. So I handed the money to my mother."

The confession appeared to put the doctor out considerably. "How very imprudent, Mr. Jan! To give away all you possessed, leaving nothing for yourself! I never heard of such a thing!"

"Lionel and his wife were turned out of everything, and had nobody to look to. I don't see that I could have put the money to better use," stoutly returned Jan. "It was not much: there's such a lot of the Clay Lane folks always wanting things when they are ill. And Miss Deb, she had had something. You keep her so short, doctor."

"But you pay her the sum that was agreed upon for housekeeping?" said Dr. West.

"What should hinder me?" returned Jan. "Of course I do. But she cannot make both ends meet, she says, and then she has to come to me. *I*'m willing: only I can't give money away and put it by too, you see."

Dr. West probably did see it. He saw, beyond doubt, that all hope of ready-money from easy Jan was gone—from the simple fact that Jan's coffers were just now empty. The fact did not afford him satisfaction.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Jan," said he, brightening up, "you shall give me your signature to a little bill—a bill at two months, let us say. It will be the same as money."

"Can't," said Jan.

"You *can't!*" replied Dr. West.

"No," said Jan, resolutely. "I'd give away all I had in hand, and welcome; but I'd never sign bills. A doctor has no business with 'em. Don't you remember what they did for Jones at Bartholomew's?"

"I don't remember Jones at Bartholomew's," frigidly returned the doctor.

"No! Why, what's gone with your memory?" innocently asked Jan. "If you think a bit, you'll recollect about him, and what his end was. Bills did it; signing bills to oblige some friend. I'll never sign a bill, doctor. I wouldn't do it for my own mother."

Thus the doctor's expectations were put a final end to, so far as Jan went—and very certain expectations they had no doubt been. As to Jan, a thought may have crossed him that the doctor and his daughter Sibylla appeared to have the same propensity for getting out of money. Dr. West recovered his equanimity, and magnanimously waived the affair as a trifle not worth dwelling on.

"Am I to understand that Sibylla has serious symptoms of disease?" asked the doctor.

"There's no doubt of it," said Jan. "You always prophesied it for her, you know. When she was at Verner's Pride she was continually ailing: not a week passed but I was called in to attend her.

She was so imprudent, too—she *would* be. Going out and getting her feet wet; sitting up half the night. We tried to bring her to reason; but it was of no use. She defied Lionel; she would not listen to me—as well speak to a post. It is of no use to mince matters—you remember how it used to be with her here at home. Lionel's a husband in a thousand. How he can possibly put up with her, and be always patient and kind, puzzles me more than any problem ever did in Euclid. If Fred had lived—why, he'd have broken her spirit or her heart, long before this."

Dr. West rose and stretched himself. He walked towards the bureau at the far corner. "Have you ever opened it, Mr. Jan?"

"It's not likely," said Jan. "Didn't you tell me not to open it? Your own papers are in it, and you hold the key."

"It's not inconvenient to you, my retaining it, I hope?" asked the doctor. "I don't know where else I should put my papers."

"Not a bit of it," said Jan. "Have another in here as well, if you like. It's safe here."

"Do you know Mr. Jan, I feel as if I'd rather sleep in your little bed to-night than indoors," said the doctor, looking at Jan's bed. "The room seems like an old friend to me: I feel at home in it."

"Sleep in it, if you like," returned Jan, in his easy good-nature. "Miss Deb can put me into some room or other. I say, doctor, it's past tea-time. Wouldn't you like some refreshment?"

"I had a good dinner on the way," replied Dr. West: which Jan might have guessed, for Dr. West was quite sure to take care of himself. "We will go in, if you like: Deb and Amilly will wonder what has become of me. How old they begin to look!"

"I don't suppose any of us look younger," answered Jan.

Later they went to Lady Verner's. Jan entered its well-lighted drawing-room in his usual unceremonious fashion. "I have brought you a visitor, Sibylla," said he, without any sort of greeting to any one. "Come in, doctor."

It caused quite a confusion, the entrance of Dr. West. All were surprised. Lionel rose, Lucy rose; Lord Garle, who had been dining with them, and Decima came forward, and Sibylla sprang towards him with a cry. Lady Verner was the only one who retained entire calmness.

"Papa! it cannot be you! When did you come?"

Dr. West kissed her, and turned to Lady Verner with some courtly words. Dr. West was an adept at such. Not the courtly words that spring from a kindly and refined nature; but those that are put on to hide a false one. All people, true-hearted ones, too, cannot distinguish between them; the false and the real. Next, the doctor grasped the hand of Lionel.

"My son-in-law!" he exclaimed in a very demonstrative manner.

"The last time you and I had the pleasure of meeting, Mr. Verner, we little anticipated that such a relationship would ensue. I rejoice to welcome you in it, my dear sir."

"True," said Lionel, with a quiet smile. "Coming events do not always cast their shadows before."

The doctor, his daughter, and Lionel sat on a couch apart, conversing in an undertone; the rest disposed themselves as they would. Dr. West had accepted a cup of coffee. He kept it in his hand, sipping it now and then, and slowly ate a biscuit.

"Mr. Jan tells me Sibylla is not very strong," he observed, addressing both of them, but more particularly Lionel.

"Not very," replied Lionel. "The cold of this winter has tried her, and given her a cough. She will be better, I hope, when it comes in warm."

"How do you feel, my dear?" inquired the doctor, apparently looking at his coffee-cup instead of at Sibylla. "Weak here?"—touching his chest.

"Not more weak than I used to be," she answered crossly, as if the confession that she did feel weak was not pleasant to her. "There's nothing the matter with me, papa; only Lionel makes a fuss."

"Nay, Sibylla," interposed Lionel, good-humouredly, "I leave that to you and Jan."

"You would like to make papa believe you don't make a fuss!" she cried resentfully. "What has Jan been telling you about me, papa? It is a shame of him! I am not ill."

"Mr. Jan has told me very little indeed of your ailments," replied Dr. West. "He says you are not strong: he says you are fretful, irritable. My dear, this arises from your state of health."

"I have thought so, too," said Lionel, speaking impulsively. Many and many a time, latterly, when she had nearly tired out his heart and his patience, had he been willing to find an excuse for her still—that illness of body caused her irritation of mind. Or, at any rate, greatly increased it.

An eye, far less experienced than that of Dr. West—who, whatever may have been his other shortcomings, was clever in his profession—could have seen at a glance how weak Sibylla was. She wore an evening dress of white muslin, its body very low and its sleeves very short; her chest was painfully thin, and every breath she took lifted it ominously. The doctor touched the muslin.

"This is not a fit dress for you, Sibylla——"

"Lionel has been putting you up to say it, papa?" she burst forth.

Dr. West looked at her. He surmised, what was indeed the case, that her husband had remonstrated against the unsuitableness of the attire to one in her condition.

"You have heard every word Mr. Verner has spoken to me, Sibylla. You should be wrapped up warmly always: to be exposed as you are now, is enough to—to"—give you your death, he was about to say, but changed the words—"make you very ill."

"Decima and Lucy Tempest dress so," she returned in tones that threatened tears.

Dr. West lifted his eyes to where Decima and Lucy were standing with Lord Garle. Decima wore a silk dress; Lucy a white one, each made for evening.

"They are both healthy," he said, "and may wear what they please. Look at their necks, compared with yours, Sibylla. I shall ask Mr. Verner to put all these thin dresses, these low bodies, behind the fire."

"He would only have the pleasure of paying for others to replace them," was the undutiful rejoinder. "Papa, I have enough trouble, without your turning against me."

Turning against her! Dr. West did not point out how purposeless were her words. His intention was to come in, in the morning, and talk to her seriously of her state of health, and the precautions it was necessary to observe. He took another sip of coffee, and turned to Lionel.

"I was about to ask you a superfluous question, Mr. Verner—whether that lost codicil has been heard of. But your leaving Verner's Pride is sufficient answer."

"It has never been heard of," replied Lionel. "When John Massingbird returned and put in his claim—when he took possession, I may say, for the one was coeval with the other—the loss of the codicil was indeed a grievance: far more than it seemed at the time of its disappearance."

"You must regret it much."

"I regret it always," he answered. "I regret it bitterly for Sibylla's sake."

"Papa," she cried in deep emotion, her blue eyes flashing with unnatural light, "if that codicil could be found, it would save my life. Jan, in his rough, stupid way, tells me I am fretting myself into my grave. Perhaps I am. I want to go back to Verner's Pride."

It was not a pleasant subject to converse on; it was a subject utterly hopeless—and Dr. West sought one more genial. Ranging his eyes over the room, they fell upon Lord Garle, who was still talking with Decima and Lucy.

"Which of the two young ladies makes the viscount's attraction, Mr. Verner?"

Lionel smiled. "They do not take me into their confidence, sir; any one of the three."

"I am sure it is not Decima, papa," spoke up Sibylla. "She's as cold as a stone. I won't answer for its not being Lucy Tempest. Lord Garle comes here a good deal, and he and Lucy seem great friends. I often think he comes for Lucy."

"Then there's little doubt upon the point," observed the doctor, coming to a more rapid conclusion than the words really warranted. "Time was, Mr. Verner, when I thought that young lady would have been your wife."

"Who?" asked Lionel. But that he only asked the question in his confusion, without need, was evident: the tell-tale flush betrayed it. His pale face had turned red to the very roots of his hair.

"In those old days, when you were ill, lying here, and Miss Tempest was so much with you, I fancied I saw signs of a mutual attachment," continued the doctor. "I conclude I must have been mistaken."

"Little doubt of that, doctor," lightly answered Lionel, recovering his equanimity, and laughing as he spoke.

Sibylla's greedy ears had taken in the words, her sharp eyes had caught the conscious flush, and her jealous heart was making the most of it. At that unfortunate moment, as ill-luck had it, Lucy brought up the basket of cakes and held it out to Dr. West. Lionel rose to take it from her.

"I was taking your name in vain, Miss Tempest," said the complacent doctor. "Did you hear me?"

"No," replied Lucy, smiling. "What about?"

"I was telling Mr. Verner that in the old days I had deemed his choice was falling upon another, rather than my daughter. Do you remember, young lady?—in that long illness of his?"

Lucy did remember. And the remembrance, thus called suddenly before her, the words themselves, the presence of Lionel, all brought to her far more emotion than had arisen to him. Her bosom heaved, and the startled colour dyed her face. Lionel saw it. Sibylla saw it.

"It proves to us how we may be mistaken, Miss Tempest," observed the doctor, who, from that habit of his, already hinted at, never looking people in the face when he spoke to them, had failed to observe anything. "I hear there is a probability of this fair hand being appropriated by another: one who can enhance his value by coupling it with a coronet."

"Don't take the trouble, Lucy. I am holding it."

It was Lionel who spoke. In her confusion she had not loosed the cake-basket, although he had taken it. Quietly, impassively, in the most unruffled manner spoke he, smiling carelessly. Only for a moment had his self-control been shaken. "Will you take biscuit, Dr. West?" he asked: and the doctor chose one.

"Lucy, my dear, step here to me."

The request came from the other end of the room, from Lady Verner. Lionel, who was about to place the cake-basket on the table, stopped and held out his arm to Lucy, to conduct her to his mother. They went forward, utterly unconscious that Sibylla was casting angry and jealous glances at them; conscious only that those sacred feelings in either heart, so well hid from the world, had been stirred to their very depths.

The door opened, and one of the servants entered. "Mr. Jan is wanted."

"Who's taken ill, now, I wonder?" cried Jan, descending from the arm of his mother's sofa, where he had been perched.

In the ante-room was Master Cheese, looking rueful.

"There's a message come from Squire Pidcock's," cried he, in most resentful tones. "Somebody's to attend immediately. Am *I* to go?"

"I suppose you'd faint at having to go, after being up at Miss Hautley's," returned Jan. "You'd never survive the two, should you?"

"Well, you know, Jan, it's a good mile-and-a-half to Pidcock's, and I had to go to the other place without my tea," remonstrated Master Cheese.

"I dare say Miss Deb has given you your tea since you came home."

"But it's not like having it at the usual hour. And I couldn't finish it in comfort, when this message came."

"Be off back and finish it now, then," said Jan. And the young gentleman departed with alacrity, while Jan made the best of his way to Squire Pidcock's.

Lionel Verner afterwards walked home with Dr. West. "What do you think of Sibylla?" was his first question, before they had well quitted the gates.

"My opinion is not a favourable one, so far as I can judge at present," replied Dr. West. "She must not be crossed, Mr. Verner."

"Heaven is my witness that she is not crossed by me, Dr. West," was the reply of Lionel, given more earnestly than the occasion seemed to call for. "From the hour I married her, my whole life has been spent in the endeavour to shield her from crosses, so far as lies in the power of man; to cherish her in all care and tenderness. There are few husbands would bear with her—her peculiarities—as I have borne; as I will still bear. I say this to you, her father; I would say it to no one else. My chief regret, at the loss of Verner's Pride, is for Sibylla's sake."

"My dear sir, I honestly believe you. I know what Sibylla was

at home, fretful, wayward, and restless; and those tendencies are not likely to be lessened, now disease has shown itself. I always feared it was in her constitution; that, in spite of all our care, she would follow her sisters. They fell off and died, you may remember, when they seemed most blooming. People talked freely—as I understood at the time—about my allowing her so suddenly to marry Frederick Massingbird; but my course was dictated by one sole motive—that it would give her the benefit of a sea-voyage, which might prove invaluable to her constitution."

Lionel believed just as much of this as he liked. Dr. West was his wife's father, and, as such, he deferred to him. He remembered what had been told him by Sibylla; and he remembered the promise he had given her.

"It's a shocking pity that you are turned from Verner's Pride!" resumed the doctor. "Does Sibylla grieve after it *very* much?"

"She grieves, no doubt. She *keeps up* the grief, if you can understand it, Dr. West. Not a day passes, but she breaks into lamentations over the loss, complaining loudly and bitterly. Whether her health would not equally have failed at Verner's Pride, I am unable to say. I think it would."

"John Massingbird, under the circumstances, ought to give it up to you. It is *rightfully* yours. Sibylla's life—and she is his own cousin—may depend upon it: he ought not to keep it. But for the loss of the codicil, he would never have come into it. What will you undertake to give me, Mr. Verner, if I can bring John Massingbird to hear reason, and re-establish you at Verner's Pride?"

"Not anything," answered Lionel. "Verner's Pride is John Massingbird's according to law; therefore it cannot be mine. Neither would he resign it."

"I wonder whether it could be done by stratagem?" mused Dr. West. "Could we persuade him that the codicil has turned up?—or something of that sort? It would be very desirable for Sibylla. And you'd give me a percentage."

"If I go back to Verner's Pride at all, sir, I go back by *right;* neither by purchase nor by stratagem," was the reply of Lionel. "I have suffered too much ever to take possession of Verner's Pride again, except by indisputable right—a right in which I cannot be disturbed. Twice have I been turned from it, as you know. And the turning out has cost me more than the world knew."

"Then you will not accept my offer—to try and get you back again; and to make me a substantial honorarium if I do it?"

"I beg your pardon—No."

It was an emphatic denial, and Dr. West may have felt himself foiled: as he had been foiled by Jan's confession of empty pockets, earlier in the evening.

He sat up that night talking to Jan, and when they parted Jan wished him a good night's rest, and never supposed but he enjoyed one. But had the room been open to public gaze in the lone night hours, Dr. West would have been seen at work instead of asleep. Every drawer of the bureau was out; every paper it contained was examined. The doctor was evidently searching for something as sedulously as he had once searched for that lost prescription, which at the time appeared so much to have disturbed his peace.

In the morning he went up to Verner's Pride, astonishing John Massingbird not a little. That gentleman was enjoying himself in a comfortable sort of way in his bedroom. A substantial breakfast was laid out on a table by the bedside, while he, not risen, smoked a pipe as he lay, by way of whetting his appetite. Dr. West entered without ceremony.

"My stars!" uttered John, when he could believe his eyes. "It's never you, Uncle West! Did you drop from a balloon?"

Dr. West explained. That he had come over for a few hours' sojourn. The health of his dear daughter Sibylla was giving him considerable uneasiness, and he had put himself to the expense and inconvenience of a journey to see her, and judge of her state himself.

That there were a few trifling inaccuracies in this statement, inasmuch as his daughter's state had had nothing to do with the doctor's journey, was of little consequence. It was all one to John Massingbird. He made a hasty toilette, and invited the doctor to take some breakfast.

Dr. West was nothing loth. He had breakfasted at home; but a breakfast more or less was nothing to Dr. West. He sat down to the table, and took a choice morsel of boned chicken on his plate.

"John, I have come up to talk to you about Verner's Pride."

"What about it?" asked John.

"The place is Lionel Verner's."

"How do you make that out?" asked John.

"That codicil revoked the will which left the estate to you. It gave it to him."

"But the codicil vanished," answered John.

"True. I was present at the consternation it excited. It disappeared in some mysterious way; but there's no doubt that Mr. Verner died, believing the estate would go in direct line to Lionel. In fact, I know he did. Therefore you ought to act as though the codicil were in existence, and resign the estate to Lionel Verner."

The recommendation excessively tickled the fancy of John Massingbird. It set him laughing for five minutes. "Uncle West, you'll kill me, if you joke like that."

"I have little doubt that the codicil is still in existence," urged Dr. West. "I remember my impression at the time was, that it was only mislaid; temporarily lost. If that codicil turned up, you would be obliged to quit."

"So I should," said John, with equanimity. "Let Lionel Verner produce it, and I'll vacate the next hour. *That* will never turn up; don't you fret yourself, Uncle West."

"Will you not resign it to him?"

"No, that I won't. Verner's Pride is mine by law. I should be a simpleton to give it up."

"Sibylla's pining for it," resumed the doctor, trying what a little pathetic pleading would do. "She will as surely die, unless she can come back to Verner's Pride, as that you and I are at breakfast here."

"If you ask my opinion, Uncle West, I should say that she'd die, any way. She looks like it. She's fading away just as the other two did. But she won't die a day sooner for being away from Verner's Pride; and she would not have lived an hour longer had she remained in it. That's my belief."

"Verner's Pride never was intended for you, John," cried the doctor. "Some freak caused Mr. Verner to will it away from Lionel; but he came to his senses before he died, and repaired the injury."

"Then I am so much the more obliged to the freak," was the good-humoured but uncompromising rejoinder of John Massingbird.

And more than that Dr. West could not make of him. John was evidently determined to stand by Verner's Pride. The doctor then changed his tactics, and tried a little business on his own account—that of borrowing from John Massingbird as much money as that gentleman would lend.

It was not much. John, in his laughing way, protested he was always "cleaned out." Nobody knew but himself—but he did not mind hinting it to Uncle West—the heaps of money he had been obliged to "shell out" before he could repose in tranquillity at Verner's Pride. There were back entanglements and present expenses. Not to speak of sums spent in benevolence. "Benevolence?" the doctor exclaimed. "Yes, benevolence," John replied with a grave face: he "had had to give away an unlimited number of bank-notes to the neighbourhood, as a recompense for having terrified it into fits." There were times when he thought he should have to come upon Lionel Verner for the mesne profits, he observed. A procedure which he was unwilling to resort to for two reasons: the one was, that Lionel possessed nothing to pay them with; the other, that he, John, never liked to be hard upon any one.

So the doctor had to content himself with a very trifling loan,

compared with the sum he had fondly anticipated. Altogether, taking one thing with another, his visit to Deerham was not quite so satisfactory as he had anticipated it might be made. After quitting John Massingbird, he went to Deerham Court and remained a few hours with Sibylla. The rest of the day he divided between his daughters in their sitting-room, and Jan in the surgery, taking his departure again from Deerham by the night-train.

And Deborah and Amilly, drowned in tears, said his visit could only be compared to the flash of a comet's tail: no sooner seen than gone again.

CHAPTER LXII.

A SIN AND A SHAME.

As the spring advanced, sickness began to prevail in Deerham. The previous autumn, the season when the enemy chiefly loved to show itself, had been comparatively free, but it appeared to be about to take its revenge now. In every third house people were down with ague and fever. Men who ought to be strong for their daily toil, women whose services were wanted for their households, children whose young frames were unfitted to battle with it, were indiscriminately attacked. It was capricious as a summer wind. In some dwellings the strongest and bravest would be singled out; in others the weakest and most delicate. Jan was worked off his legs. Those necessary appendages to active Jan were generally exercised pretty well; but Jan could not remember the time when they had been worked as they were now. Jan grew cross. Not at the amount of work: it may be questioned whether Jan did not rather prefer that, than the contrary; but at the prevalent state of things. "It's a sin and a shame that precautions are not taken against this periodical sickness," said Jan, speaking out more forcibly than was his wont. "If the place were drained and the dwellings improved, the ague would depart to more congenial quarters. *I* wouldn't own Verner's Pride, unless I could show myself fit to be its master."

The shaft may have been levelled at John Massingbird, but Lionel Verner took it to himself. How full of self-reproach he was, he alone knew. He had had the power in his own hands to make these improvements, and in some manner or other he had allowed the time to slip by: now, the power was wrested from him. It is ever so. Golden opportunities come into our hands, and we look at them complacently, and—do not use them. Bitter regrets, sometimes remorse, take their places when they have flitted away

for ever; but neither regret nor remorse can recall a lost opportunity.

Lionel pressed the necessity upon John Massingbird. It was all he could do now. John received it with good-humour, and laughed at Lionel for making the request. But that was all.

"Set about draining Clay Lane, and build up new tenements in place of the old?" cried he. "What next, Lionel?"

"Look at the sickness the present state of things brings about," returned Lionel. "It is what ought to have been altered years ago."

"Ah!" said John. "Why didn't you alter it, then, when you had Verner's Pride?"

"You may well ask! It was my first thought when I came into the estate. I would set about that; I would set about other improvements. Some I did carry out, as you know; but these, the most needful, I left in abeyance. It lies on my conscience now."

They were in the study. Lionel was at the desk, with papers before him; John Massingbird had lounged in for a chat—as he was fond of doing, to the interruption of Lionel. He was leaning against the door-post; his attire not precisely such as a gentleman might choose who wished to make a morning call. His pantaloons were secured by a belt; braces, John said, were not fashionable at the diggings, and he had learned the comfort of doing without them; a loose drab coat without tails; no waistcoat; a brown hat, much bent; and a pair of slippers. This was John Massingbird's favourite costume, and he might be seen in it at all hours of the day. When he wanted to go out, his toilette was made, as the French say, by exchanging slippers for boots, and taking up a club stick. John's whiskers were growing again, and promised to be as fine a pair as he had worn before going out to Australia: and now he was letting his beard grow, but it looked grim and stubbly. Truth to say, a stranger passing through the village and casting his eyes on Mr. John Massingbird, would have taken him for a stable helper, rather than the master of that fine place, Verner's Pride. Just now he had a clay pipe in his mouth, its stem about two inches long.

"I suppose you think you'd do it?" said John. "I can't afford it."

"Nonsense! I wish I could afford things a quarter as well as you."

"I tell you I can't," reiterated John, taking his pipe from his mouth. "I'm sure I don't know how on earth my money goes; I never did know all my life how my money went: but, go it does. When Fred and I were little chaps, some benevolent old soul tipped us half-a-crown a-piece. Mine was gone by middle-day, and I

could not account for more than ninepence of it: never could till this day. Fred at the end of a twelvemonth had his half-crown still snug in his pocket. Had Fred come into Verner's Pride, he'd have lived in style on a thousand of his income yearly, and put by the rest."

Sibylla being his wife, he never would, thought Lionel. But he did not say it to John Massingbird.

"An estate, such as this, brings its duties with it, John," said he. "Remember those poor people down with sickness."

"Bother duty," returned John. "Look here, Lionel; you are wasting breath and words. I have *not* got the money to spend upon it; how do you know, old fellow, what my private expenses may be? And if I had the money, I should not do it," he continued. "The present state of the property was deemed good enough by Mr. Verner; it was so deemed (if we may judge by actual facts) by Mr. Lionel Verner; and it is deemed good enough by John Massingbird. It is not he who is going to have the cost thrown upon him. So let it drop."

There was no resource but to let it drop; for that he was in earnest, Lionel saw. John continued:

"You can save up the alterations for yourself, to be commenced when you come into the property. A nice *bonne bouche* in the way of outlay for you to contemplate."

"I don't expect to come into the property," replied Lionel.

"The probabilities are that you will come into it," returned John Massingbird, more seriously than he often spoke. "Barring getting shot, or run over by a train, you'll make old bones. You have never played with your constitution. I have, in more ways than one: and in years I have considerably the advantage of you. Psha! when I am a skeleton in my coffin, you'll still be a young man. You can make your cherished alterations then."

"You may well say in more ways than one," returned Lionel, half joking, half serious. "There's smoking amidst the catalogue. How many pipes do you smoke in a day? Fifty?"

"Why didn't you say day and night? Tynn lives in perpetual torment lest my bed should ignite some night, and burn him up, as well as Verner's Pride. I go to sleep sometimes with my pipe in my mouth as we do at the diggings. Now and then I feel half inclined to make a rush back there. It suited me better than this."

Lionel bent over some papers that were before him—a hint that he had business to do. Mr. Massingbird did not take it. He began filling his pipe again, scattering tobacco on the ground wholesale in the process, and talking at the same time.

"I say, Lionel, why did old Verner leave the place away from you? Have you ever wondered?"

Lionel glanced up at him in surprise.

"Have I ever ceased wondering, you might have said. I don't know why he did."

"Did he never give you a reason—or an explanation?"

"Nothing of the sort. Except—yes, except a trifle. Some time after his death, Mrs. Tynn discovered a formidable-looking packet in one of his drawers: sealed, and directed to me. She thought it was the missing codicil; so did I, until I opened it. It proved to contain nothing but a glove; one of my old gloves, and a few lines from my uncle. They were to the effect that when I received the glove I should know why he disinherited me."

"And did you know?" asked John Massingbird, applying a light to his pipe.

"Not in the least. It left the affair more obscure, if possible, than it had been before. I suppose I never shall know now."

"Never's a long day," cried John Massingbird. "But you told me about this glove affair before."

"Did I? Oh, I remember. When you first returned. That is all the explanation I have ever had."

"It was not much," said John. "Dickens take this pipe! It won't draw. Where's my knife?"

Not finding his knife about him, he went off to look for it, shuffling his slippers along the hall in his usual lazy fashion. Lionel, glad of the respite, applied himself to work. And some days passed on.

One of those lying ill, but not of ague, was old Matthew Frost. Lionel, hearing that the end was at hand, went to see him.

Old Matthew was lying on his bed, very peaceful. Peaceful as to his inward and his outward state. He was passing away without pain, and with his faculties about him. What a happy death-bed, when all is peace within! His dim eyes lighted up with pleasure when he saw Mr. Verner.

"Have you come to see the last of me, sir?" he asked, as Lionel took his hand.

"Not quite the last yet, I hope, Matthew."

"Don't hope it, sir; nor wish it, either," returned the old man, lifting his hand with a deprecatory movement. "I'm on the threshold of a better world, sir, and I would not turn back to this, if God gave me the choice. I'm going to my rest, sir. As my bed has waited for me and been welcome to me after a hard day's toil, so is my rest now at hand after my life's toil. It is as surely waiting for me as my bed ever was; and I am longing to get to it."

Lionel looked down at the calm, serene face, fair and smooth yet. It may be wrong to say there was a holy expression upon the face; but it certainly gave that impression to Lionel Verner.

"I wish all the world—when their time comes—could die as you are dying, Matthew!" he exclaimed, in the impulse of his heart.

"Sir, all *might*. If they'd only live for it. It's many a year ago now, Mr. Lionel, that I learnt to make a friend of God: He has stood me in good need. And those that do learn to make a friend of Him, sir, don't fear to go to Him."

Lionel drew forward a chair and sat down. The old man continued:

"Things seem to have been smoothed for me in a wonderful way, sir. My great trouble, of late years, has been Robin. I feared how it might be with him when I went away and left him here alone: for you know the queer way he has been in, sir, since that great misfortune; and I have been a bit of a check on him, keeping him, as may be said, within bounds. Well, that trouble is done away for me, sir; Robin's mind is at rest, and he won't break out again. In a short time I am in hopes he'll be quite what he used to be."

"Matthew, it was my firm intention to continue your annuity to Robin," spoke Lionel. "I am sorry the power to do so has been taken from me. You know that it will not rest with me now, but with Mr. Massingbird. I fear he is not likely to continue it."

"Don't regret it, sir. Robin, I say, is growing industrious again, and he can well get a living. If he had stopped a half-dazed-do-nothing, he might have wanted that, or some other help; but it isn't so. His trouble's at rest, and his old energies are coming back to him. It seems to have left my mind at leisure, sir; and I can go, praying for the souls of my poor daughter and of Frederick Massingbird."

The name—*his*—aroused the attention of Lionel: more perhaps than he would have cared to confess. But his voice and manner retained their calmness.

"What did you say, Matthew?"

"It was him, sir; Mr. Frederick Massingbird. It was nobody else."

Down deep in Lionel Verner's heart there had lain a conviction, almost ever since that fatal night, that the man had been no other than the one now spoken of, the younger Massingbird. Why the impression should have come to him he could not have told at the time: something perhaps in Frederick's manner had given rise to it. On the night before John Massingbird's departure for Australia, after the long interview he had held with Mr. Verner in the study, which was interrupted by Lionel on the part of Robin Frost, the three young men—the Massingbirds and Lionel—had subsequently remained together, discussing the tragedy. In that interview, a sudden doubt of Frederick Massingbird had entered

the mind of Lionel. It was impossible for him to tell why: he only knew that the impression—nay, it were more correct to say the conviction, seized hold upon him, never to be eradicated. Perhaps something strange in Frederick's manner awoke it. Lionel surmised not how far his guilt might have extended; but that he was guilty he fully believed. It was not his business to proclaim this; had it been a certainty, instead of a fancy, Lionel would not have made it his business: but when Frederick Massingbird was on the point of marrying Sibylla, then Lionel partially broke through his reserve, and asked him whether he had nothing on his conscience that ought to prevent his making her his wife. Frederick answered freely and frankly to all appearance, and for the moment Lionel's doubts were dissipated: only, however, to return afterwards with added force. Consequently he was not surprised to hear this said, though surprised at Matthew Frost's knowing it.

"How did you hear it, Matthew?" he asked.

"Robin got at it, sir. Poor Robin, he was altogether on the wrong scent for a long while, thinking it was Mr. John; but it's set right now, and Robin is at ease. May Heaven have mercy upon Frederick Massingbird!"

Successful rival though he had proved to him, guilty man that he had been, Lionel heartily echoed the prayer. He asked no more questions of the old man upon the subject, but afterwards, when he was going out, he met Robin and stopped him.

"Robin, what is this that your father has been telling me about Frederick Massingbird?"

"Only to think of it!" was Robin's response, growing somewhat excited. "To think how our ways get baulked! I had swore to be revenged—as you know, sir—and now the power of revenge is taken from me! He's gone where revenge can't reach him. It's of no good—I see it—for us to plot and plan. Our plans will never be carried out, if they don't please God."

"And it was Frederick Massingbird?"

"It was Frederick Massingbird," assented Robin, his breath coming fast with agitation. "We had but one little ewe lamb, and he must leave the world that was open to him, take her, and destroy her! I'm not calm yet to talk of it, sir."

"But how did you ascertain this? Your suspicions, you know, were directed to Mr. John Massingbird. Wrongly, as I believed; as I told you."

"Yes, they were wrong," said Robin. "I was put upon the wrong scent: but not wilfully. You might remember a dairy wench that lived at Verner's Pride in those days, sir—Dolly, her name was; she that went and got married to Joe Stubbs, Mr. Bitterworth's waggoner. It was she told me, sir. I used to be up there a good

bit with Stubbs, and one day when I was sick and ill there, the wife told me she had seen one of the gentlemen come from the Willow Pool that past night. I pressed her to tell me which of them, and at first she said she couldn't, and then she said it was Mr John. I never thought but she told me right, but it seems—as she confesses now—that she only fixed on him to satisfy me, and because she thought he was dead, over in Australia, and it wouldn't matter if she did say it. I worried her life out over it, she says: and it's like I did. She says now, if she was put upon her Bible oath, she couldn't say which of the gentlemen it was, more than the other: but she did see one of 'em."

"But this is not telling me how you know it to have been Mr. Frederick, Robin."

"I learnt it from Mr. John," was the reply. "When he came back I saw him; I knew it was him; and I got a gun and watched for him. I meant to take my revenge, sir. Roy found me out; and in a night or two, he brought me face to face with Mr. John, and Mr. John told me the truth. But he'd only tell it me upon my giving him my promise not to expose his brother. So I'm baulked even of that revenge. I had always counted on exposing the man," added Robin, dreamily, as if he were looking back into the past: "when I thought it was Mr. John, I only waited for Luke Roy to come home, that I might expose him. I judged that Luke, being so much with him in Australia, might have heard a word dropped as would confirm it. Somehow, though I thought Dolly Stubbs spoke truth, I didn't feel so sure of her as to noise it abroad."

"You say it was Mr. John Massingbird who told you it was his brother?"

"He told me, sir. He told me at Roy's, when he was in hiding there. When the folks here were going mad about the ghost, I knew who the ghost was, and had my laugh at 'em. It seemed that I could laugh then," added Robin, looking at Mr. Verner, as if he deemed an apology for the words necessary. "My mind was set at rest."

Did a thought cross Lionel Verner that John Massingbird, finding his own life in peril from Robin's violence, had thrown the blame upon his brother falsely? It might have done so, but for his own deeply-rooted suspicions. That John would not be scrupulously mindful of truth, he believed, where his own turn was to be served. Lionel at any rate felt that he should like, for his own satisfaction, to have the matter set at rest, and he took his way at once to Verner's Pride.

John Massingbird, his costume not improved in elegance, or his clay pipe in length, was lounging at his ease on one of the amber damask satin couches of the drawing-room, his feet on the back of

a chair, and his slippers fallen on to the carpet. A tumbler of rum-and-water—his favourite beverage since his return—was at hand on a table; and there he lay enjoying his ease.

"Hallo, old fellow! How are you?" was his greeting to Lionel, given without changing his position in the least.

"Massingbird, I want to speak to you," rejoined Lionel. "I have been to see old Matthew Frost, and he has said something which surprises me——"

"The old man's about to make a start of it, I hear," was the interruption of Mr. Massingbird.

"He cannot last long. He has been speaking—naturally—of that unhappy business of his daughter's. He lays it to the door of Frederick; and Robin tells me he had the information from you."

"I was obliged to give it him, in self-defence," said John Massingbird. "The fellow had taken it into his head in some unaccountable manner that I was the black sheep, and was prowling about with a gun, ready capped and loaded, to put a bullet into me. I don't set so much store by my life as some fidgets do, but it's not pleasant to be shot off in that summary fashion. So I sent for Mr. Robin, and satisfied him that he was making the same blunder that Deerham was just then making—mistaking one brother for the other."

"*Was* it Frederick?"

"It was."

"Did you know it at the time?"

"No. Never suspected him at all."

"Then how did you learn it afterwards?"

John Massingbird took his legs from the chair. He rose, and brought himself to an anchor on a seat facing Lionel, puffing still at his pipe.

"I don't mind trusting you, old chap, being one of us, and I couldn't help trusting Robin Frost. Roy knew it before: at least, his wife did; which amounts to the same thing; and she spoke of it to me. I have ordered them to keep a close tongue, under pain of unheard-of penalties. I should never inflict them, but it's as well to let poor Fred's memory rest quietly in good odour. I believe honestly it's the only scrape of the sort he ever got into. He was cold and cautious."

"But how did you learn it?" reiterated Lionel.

"I'll tell you. I learnt it from Luke Roy."

"From Luke Roy!" repeated Lionel, more at sea than before.

"Do you remember that I had sent Luke on to London a few days before this happened? He was to get things forward for our voyage. He was *fou*—as the French say—after Rachel; and what

did he do but come back in secret, for a last look at her, perhaps a word. It happened to be this very night, and Luke was a partial witness to the scene at the Willow Pond. He saw and heard her meeting with Frederick; heard quite enough to know that there was no chance for him; and he was stealing away, leaving Fred and Rachel at the termination of their quarrel, when he met his mother. She knew him, it seems, and to that encounter we are indebted for her display when before Mr. Verner, and her lame account of the 'ghost.' You must recollect it. She got up the ghost tale to excuse her own terror, and to throw the scent off Luke. The woman says her life, since, has been that of a martyr, ever fearing that suspicion of the murder might fall upon her son. She recognized him beyond doubt; and nearly died with consternation. He glided off, never speaking to her, but the fear remained. She recognized, too, she says, the voice of Frederick as the one who was quarrelling; but she did not dare confess it. For one thing, she knew not how far Luke might be implicated in the matter."

Lionel leaned his brow on his hand, deep in thought. "How far was Frederick implicated?" he asked in low tones. "Did he—did he throw her into the pond?"

"No!" burst forth John Massingbird, with a vehemence that sent the ashes of his pipe flying. "Fred would not be guilty of such a crime as that, any more than you or I would be. He had—he had made vows to the girl, and broken them; and that was the extent of it. No such great sin, after all, or it wouldn't be so fashionable," carelessly added John Massingbird.

Lionel waited in silence.

"By what Luke could gather," went on John, "it appeared that Rachel had seen Fred that night with his cousin Sibylla—your wife now. What she had seen or heard, goodness knows: but enough to prove to her that Fred's real love was given to Sibylla, and she was his contemplated wife It drove Rachel mad: Fred had probably given her the idea that the honour was destined for herself. Men are deceivers ever, and women soft, you know, Lionel."

"And they quarrelled over it?"

"They quarrelled over it. Rachel, awakened out of her credulity, met him with bitter reproaches. Luke could not hear what was said towards its close. The meeting—no doubt a concerted one—had been in that grove in sight of the Willow Pond, the very spot that Master Luke had chosen for his own hiding-place. They left it and walked towards Verner's Pride, disputing vehemently. Luke made off the other way, and the last he saw of them, when they were nearly out of sight, was a final explosion, in which they parted.

Fred set off towards Verner's Pride, and Rachel came flying back towards the pond. There's not a shadow of doubt that in her passion, her unhappy state of feeling, she flung herself into it: and if Luke had only waited two minutes longer, he might have been in at the death—as we say by the foxes. That's the solution of what has puzzled Deerham for years, Lionel."

"Could Luke not have saved her?"

"He never knew she was in the pond. Whether the unexpected sight of his mother scared his senses away, he has often wondered; but he heard neither the splash in the water nor the shriek after it. He made off, pretty quickly, he says, for fear his mother should attempt to stop him, or proclaim his presence—an inconvenient procedure, since he was supposed to be in London. Luke never knew of her death until we were on the voyage. I got to London only in time to go on board the ship in the docks, and we had been out for days at sea before he learnt that Rachel was dead, or I that Luke had been down, on the sly, to Deerham. I had to get over that precious sea-sickness, before entering upon that, or any other talk, I can tell you. It's a shame it should attack men!"

"I suspected Fred at the time," said Lionel.

"You did! Well, I did not. My suspicions had turned to a very different quarter."

"Upon whom?"

"Oh, bother! where's the good of ripping it up, now it's over and done with?" retorted John Massingbird. "There's the paper of baccy by your elbow, old fellow. Chuck it here."

CHAPTER LXIII.

A CRISIS IN SIBYLLA'S LIFE.

SIBYLLA VERNER improved neither in health nor in temper. Body and mind were alike diseased. As the spring had advanced, her weakness appeared to increase; symptoms of consumption became more palpable. She would not admit that she was ill; she no doubt thought there was nothing seriously the matter with her, nothing, as she told every one, but grieving after Verner's Pride.

The whole business of her life appeared to be to grumble; to be cross, snappish, fretful. How weary her husband's ear was, how weary his spirit, no tongue could tell. She tried him in every way—she did nothing but find fault with him. When he stayed out, she grumbled at him for doing so, meeting him with reproaches on his entrance; when he remained in, she reproached him. Times

upon times Lionel felt inclined to run away; as disobedient boys run away to sea.

The little hint dropped by Dr. West, had not been without its fruits in Sibylla's mind. It lay and smouldered there. *Had* Lionel been attached to Lucy?—had there been love-scenes, love-making between them? Sibylla asked herself the question ten times in a day. Now and then she would drop a sharp bit of venom upon him—his "old love, Lucy." Lionel would receive it impassively, never answering.

On the day spoken of in the last chapter, when Matthew Frost was dying, she was more ill at ease, more intensely irritable, than usual. Lady Verner had gone with some friends to Heartbury, and was not expected home until night; Decima and Lucy walked out in the afternoon, and Sibylla was alone. Lionel had not been home since he had gone out in the morning to see Matthew Frost. The fact was, Lionel had had a busy day of it; what with old Matthew, and what with his conversation with John Massingbird afterwards, certain work which ought to have been done in the morning he had left until the afternoon. It was nothing unusual for him to be out all day: but Sibylla was choosing to make his being out to-day an unusual grievance. As the hours passed on and on, and it grew late, and no one appeared, she could scarcely suppress her temper or her restlessness. She was a very bad one to be alone: had never liked to be alone for five minutes in her life: and thence perhaps the secret of her having made so much of a companion of her maid, Benoite. In point of fact, Sibylla Verner had no resources within herself; and she made up for the deficiency by indulging her naturally bad temper.

Where were they? Where was Decima? Where was Lucy? Above all, where was Lionel? Sibylla, unable to answer the questions, suddenly began to imagine a pretty little plot—Lucy and Lionel were somewhere together. Had Sibylla possessed supernatural vision, she might have seen Lionel seated alone in the study at Verner's Pride, amidst his leases and papers; and Lucy in Clay Lane, paying visits with Decima from cottage to cottage. Not possessing that vision, Sibylla was content to indulge the mental view she had conjured up, and to improve upon it. By the end of the afternoon she had worked herself up to that agreeable pitch of distorted excitement when the mind does not know what is real, and what is fancied. It was a regular April day; one of sunshine and storm: now, the sun shone out bright and clear; now, the rain pattered against the panes; and Sibylla wandered from room to room, upstairs and down, her mood as stormy as the weather.

Had her dreams been borne out by fact? Upon glancing from the window, during a sharper shower than any they had yet had,

she saw her husband coming in at the large gates, Lucy Tempest on his arm, over whom he was holding an umbrella. They were walking slowly; conversing—as it seemed—confidentially. It was quite enough for Mrs. Verner.

But it was a very innocent, accidental meeting, and the confidential conversation was only about the state of poor old Matthew Frost. Lionel had taken Clay Lane on his way home for the purpose of inquiring after old Matthew. There, standing in the kitchen, he found Lucy. Decima was with the old man, and it was uncertain how long she would remain with him: and Lucy accepted part of his umbrella to go back to Deerham Court. As they advanced through the courtyard, Lucy saw Sibylla at the small drawing-room window—the ante-room, as it was called—and nodded a smiling greeting to her. She did not return it, and Lionel saw that his wife looked black as night.

They came in, Lucy untying her bonnet-strings, and addressing Sibylla in pleasant tones.

"What a sharp storm!" she said. "I don't know how I should have come through it, but for Mr. Verner's umbrella."

No reply from Mrs. Verner.

"Decima is staying with old Matthew Frost," continued Lucy, passing into the drawing-room. "She desired that we would not wait dinner for her."

Then Sibylla began. She turned upon Lionel in a state of perfect fury; her temper, like a torrent, bearing down all before it—all decency, all consideration.

"Where have you been? You and she?"

"Do you allude to Lucy?" he asked, pausing before he replied, and looking at her in surprise. "We have been nowhere. I saw her at old Frost's as I came by, and brought her home."

"It is a falsehood!" raved Sibylla. "You are carrying on a secret intimacy with each other. I have been blind long enough, but——"

Lionel caught her arm, pointing in peremptory silence to the drawing-room door, which was not closed, his white face betraying his inward agitation.

"She is there!" he whispered: "and can hear you."

But Sibylla's passion was terrible—not to be controlled. All the courtesies of life were lost sight of—its social usages were as nothing. She flung Lionel's hand away from her.

"I hope she can hear me!" broke like a torrent from her trembling lips. "It is time she heard, and others also! I have been blind, I say, long enough. But for papa, I might have gone on in my blindness to the end."

How was he to stop it? That Lucy must hear every word as

plainly as he did, he knew: words that fell upon his ears, and blistered them. There was no exit for her—no other door—she was in there, caged, as may be said. He did what was the best to be done under the circumstances: he walked into the presence of Lucy, leaving Sibylla to herself. At least it might have been the best in some cases. It was not so in this. Sibylla, lost in that moment to all sense of the respect due to herself, to her husband, to Lucy, allowed her wild fancies, her passion, to overmaster everything; and she followed him in. Her eyes blazing, she planted herself in front of Lucy.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, Lucy Tempest, to wile away my husband from me?"

Lucy looked perfectly aghast. That she thought Mrs. Verner had suddenly gone mad, may be excused to her. A movement of fear escaped her, and she involuntarily drew nearer to Lionel, as if for protection.

"No! you shan't go to him! There has been enough of it. He is my husband! How dare you forget it?"

"I — don't — know — what — you — mean, Mrs. Verner," gasped Lucy, the words coming brokenly from her bloodless lips.

"Can you deny that he cares for you more than he does for me? That you care for him in return? Can you——"

"Be silent, Sibylla!" burst forth Lionel. "Do you know that you are speaking to Miss Tempest?"

"I won't be silent!" she reiterated, her voice rising to a scream. "Who is Lucy Tempest, that you should care for her? You know you do! you know that you meant to marry her once!"

Pushing his wife into a chair, Lionel caught Lucy's hand, and led her from the room. Outside the other room he halted. Lucy was shaking with emotion, and tears were coursing down her cheeks. He took her hands in his, his action one of entreaty, his words falling in tenderest accents.

"Will you *bear* for my sake, Lucy? She is my wife. Heaven knows upon any other how I would retort the insult."

How Lucy's heart was wrung!—wrung for him. The insult to herself she could afford to pass by: being innocent, it fell upon her with very slender force; but she felt keenly for his broken peace. Lionel closed the door upon her, and returned to his wife.

A change had come over Sibylla. She had thrown herself at full length on a sofa, and was beginning to sob. He went up to her, and spoke gravely, not unkindly, his arms folded before him.

"Sibylla, when is this line of conduct to cease? I am nearly wearied out—very nearly," he repeated, putting his hand to his brow, "wearied out. If I could bear exposure for myself, I cannot bear it for my wife."

She rose and sat down on the sofa facing him. The usual hectic of her cheeks had turned to scarlet.

"You do love her! You care for her more than you care for me. Can you deny it?"

"What part of my conduct has ever told you so?"

"I don't care for conduct," she fractiously retorted. "I remember what papa said, and that's enough. He said he saw how it was in the old days—that you loved her. What business had you to love her?"

"Stay, Sibylla! Carry your reflections back, and answer yourself. In those old days, when you were both before me to choose—at any rate, to *ask*—I chose *you*, leaving her. Is it not a sufficient answer?"

Sibylla threw back her head on the sofa, and began to cry.

"From the hour that I made you my wife, I have striven to do my duty by you, tenderly as husband can do it. Why do you force me to reiterate this declaration, which I have made before?" he added, his face working with emotion. "Neither by word nor action have I been false to you. I have never for the briefest moment been guilty behind your back of that which I would not be guilty of in your presence. No! my allegiance has never swerved from you. So help me Heaven!"

"You can't swear to me that you don't love her!" was Sibylla's retort.

It appeared that he did not intend to swear it. He went and stood against the mantel-piece, in his old favourite attitude, leaning his elbow on it and his face upon his hand: a face that betrayed his inward pain. Sibylla began again: to tantalize him seemed a necessity of her life.

"I might have expected trouble when I consented to marry you. Rachel Frost's fate might have taught me the lesson."

"Stay," said Lionel, lifting his head. "It is not the first hint of the sort that you have given me. Tell me honestly what it is you mean."

"You need not ask: you know already. Rachel owed her disgrace to you."

Lionel paused a moment before he rejoined. When he did so, it was in quiet tones.

"Do you speak from your own opinion?"

"No, I don't. The secret was entrusted to me."

"By whom? You must tell me, Sibylla."

"I don't know why I should not," she slowly said, as if in deliberation. "My husband trusted me with it."

"Do you allude to Frederick Massingbird?" asked Lionel, in tones whose coldness he could not help.

"Yes, I do. He *was* my husband," she resentfully added. "One day, on the voyage to Australia, he dropped a word that made me think he knew something about that business of Rachel's, and I teased him to tell me who it was who had played her false. He said it was Lionel Verner."

A pause. But for Lionel's admirable disposition, how terribly he might have retorted upon her, knowing what he had learnt that day.

"Did he tell you I had completed the wrong by throwing her into the pond?" he inquired.

"I don't know. I don't remember. Perhaps he did."

"And—doubting it—you could marry me!" quietly remarked Lionel.

She made no answer.

"Let me set you right on that point once for all, then," he continued. "I was innocent as you. I had nothing to do with it. Rachel and her father were held in too great respect by my uncle—nay, by me, I may add—for me to offer *her* anything but respect. You were misinformed, Sibylla."

She laughed scornfully. "It is easy to say so."

"As it was for Frederick Massingbird to say what he did to you."

"If it came to the choice," she retorted, "I would rather believe him than you."

Bitter aggravation lay in her tone, in her gesture. Was Lionel tempted to forget himself?—to set her right? If so, he beat the temptation down. All men would not have been so forbearing.

"Sibylla, I have told you truth," he simply said.

"Which is as much as to say that Fred told——" she was vehemently beginning, when the words were stopped by the entrance of John Massingbird. John, caught in the shower near Deerham Court, made no scruple of running to it for shelter, and was in time to witness Sibylla's angry tones and inflamed face.

What precisely happened, Lionel could never afterwards recall. He remembered John's free and easy salutation, "What's the row?"—he remembered Sibylla's torrent of words in answer. As little given to reticence or delicacy in the presence of her cousin, as she had been in that of Lucy Tempest, she renewed her accusation of her husband with regard to Rachel: she called on him—John—to bear testimony that Fred was truthful. And Lionel remembered little more until he saw Sibylla lying back gasping, blood pouring from her mouth.

John Massingbird—perhaps in his eagerness to contradict her, as much as in his regard to make known the truth—had answered her all too effectually before Lionel could stop him. Words that burnt into the brain of Sibylla Verner, and turned the current of her life's pulses.

It was her husband of that voyage, Frederick Massingbird, who had brought the evil upon Rachel, who had been with her at the pond that night.

As the words left John Massingbird's lips, she rose, and stood staring at him. Presently she essayed to speak, but not a sound issued from her drawn lips. Whether passion stayed her utterance, or dismay, or whether it may have been any physical impediment, it was evident that she could not get the words out.

Fighting her hands on the empty air, fighting for breath or for speech, so she remained for a passing moment: and then the blood began to trickle from her mouth. The excitement had caused her to burst a blood-vessel.

Lionel crossed over to her: her best support. He held her in his arms, tenderly and considerately as though she had never given him an unwifely word. Stretching out his other hand to the bell, he rang it loudly. And then he looked at John Massingbird.

"Run for your life," he whispered. "Get Jan here."

CHAPTER LXIV.

WELL-NIGH WEARIED OUT.

THE months went on, and Deerham was in commotion. Not the Clay Lane portion of it, of whom I think you have chiefly heard, but that more refined if less useful section, represented by Lady Verner, the Emsleys, the Bitterworths, and other of the aristocracy congregated in its environs.

Summer had long come in, and was now on the wane; and Sir Edmund Hautley, the only son and heir of Sir Rufus, was expected home. He had quitted the service, had made the overland route, and was now halting in Paris; but the day of his arrival at Deerham Hall was fixed. And this caused the commotion: for it had pleased Miss Hautley to determine to welcome him with a *fête* and ball, the like of which for splendour had never been heard of in the county.

Miss Hautley was a little given to have opinions of her own, and to hold to them. Sir Rufus had been the same. Their friends called it firmness; their enemies obstinacy. The only sister of Sir Rufus, not cordial with him during his lifetime, she had invaded the Hall as soon as life had left him, quitting her own comfortable and substantial residence to do it, and persisted in taking up her abode there until Sir Edmund should return; as she persisted now in giving this *fête* in his honour. In vain those who deemed themselves privileged to speak, pointed out to Miss Hautley, that a *fête*

might be considered out of place, given before Sir Rufus had been dead a twelvemonth, and that Sir Edmund might deem it so; furthermore, that Sir Edmund might prefer to find quietness on his arrival instead of a crowd.

They might as well have talked to the wind, for all the impression it made upon Miss Hautley. Preparations for the gathering went on quickly, invitations had gone out, and Deerham's head was turned. Those who did not receive invitations were ready to devour those who did. Miss Hautley was as exclusive as ever proud old Sir Rufus had been, and many were left out who thought they *might* have been invited. Amongst others, the Miss Wests thought so, especially as one card had gone to their house—for Mr. Jan Verner.

Two cards had been left at Deerham Court. For Lady and Miss Verner: for Mr. and Mrs. Verner. By some strange oversight, Miss Tempest was omitted. That it was simply an oversight was undoubted; and so it turned out to have been. For, after the *fête* was over, reserved old Miss Hautley condescended to explain that it was so, and to apologize; but this is dating forward. It was not recognized as an oversight when the cards arrived, and Lady Verner felt inclined to resent it. She hesitated whether to retaliate and stay away herself; or whether to take no notice of it, farther than by conveying Lucy to the Hall in place of Decima. Lucy decided the matter by saying she should not have gone had there been a card for her: she did not care for the *fête*.

Lady Verner resigned herself to the decision, but she did not look pleased.

"It is to be I and Decima, then. Lionel"—glancing across the table at him—"you will accompany me. I cannot go without you."

It was at the luncheon-table they were discussing this: a meal of which Lionel rarely partook; in fact, he was rarely at home to partake of it; but he happened to be there to-day. Sibylla was present. Recovered from the accident—if it may be so called—the breaking a blood-vessel; she had appeared to grow stronger and better with the summer weather. Jan knew the improvement was deceitful, and told them so; told *her* so; that the very greatest caution was necessary, if she would avert a second similar attack; in fact, half the time of Jan's visits at Deerham Court was spent in enjoining perfect tranquillity on Sibylla.

But she was so obstinate! She would not keep herself quiet: she would go out; she would wear those thin summer dresses, with low bodies in the evening. She is wearing a delicate muslin now, as she sits by Lady Verner, and her blue eyes are suspiciously bright, and her cheeks are suspiciously hectic, and the old laboured

breathing can be seen through the muslin, moving her chest up and down, as it used to be seen. A lovely vision still, with her golden hair clustering about her; but her hands are hot and trembling, and her frame is painfully thin. Certainly she does not look fit to enter upon evening gaiety, and Lady Verner in addressing her son, "You will go with me, Lionel," proved that she never so much as gave a thought to the improbability of Sibylla's venturing thither.

"If—you—particularly wish it, mother," was Lionel's reply, spoken with hesitation.

"Do you not wish to go?" rejoined Lady Verner.

"I would very much prefer not to do so," he replied.

"Nonsense, Lionel; I don't think you have gone out once since you left Verner's Pride. Staying at home won't mend matters. I *wish* you to go with me; I shall make a point of it."

Lady Verner spoke with some irritation, and Lionel said no more. He supposed he must acquiesce.

It was no long-timed invitation of weeks. The cards arrived on the Monday, and the *fête* was for the following Thursday. Lionel thought no more about it; he was not as the ladies, whose toilettes would take all that time to prepare. On the Wednesday, on going suddenly into his wife's sitting-room upstairs, he found her figuring off before the glass, after the manner of her girlish days, a wreath of white flowers on her head. She was pulling it here and there with her thin and trembling hands; and other wreaths were lying near.

"What are you doing?" asked Lionel.

"Trying on wreaths, to see which suits me best. This looks too white for me, does it not?" she added, turning towards him.

If not to be the same hue as her complexion, "too white," it certainly did look. The dead white of the roses was not more utterly colourless than Sibylla's face. She was like a ghost: she often looked so now.

"Sibylla," he said, without answering her question, "you are surely not thinking of going to Sir Edmund's to-morrow night?"

"Yes I am."

"You said you would write a refusal?"

"I know I *said* it. I saw how cross-grained you were going to be over it, and that's why I said it to you. I accepted the invitation."

"But, my dear, you must not go!"

Sibylla put off the white wreath, and took up a pink one. "After all," deliberated she, "I have a great mind to wear pearls. Not a wreath at all."

"Sibylla! I say you *must* not go."

"Now, Lionel, it is of no use your talking. I have made up my

mind to go; I did from the first; and go I shall. Don't you remember," she continued, turning her face from the glass towards him, her careless tone changing to one of sharpness, "that papa said I must not be crossed?"

"But you are not in a state to go out," remonstrated Lionel. "Jan forbids it utterly."

"Jan? Jan's in your pay. He says what you tell him to say."

"Child, how can you utter such things?" he asked with emotion. "When Jan interdicts your going out he has only your welfare at heart. And you *know* that I have it. Evening air and scenes of excitement are equally dangerous for you."

"I shall go," returned Sibylla. "*You* are going, you know," she said resentfully. "I wonder you don't propose that I shall be locked up at home in a dark closet, while you are there, dancing."

A moment's deliberation, and a rapid resolution. "I shall not go, Sibylla," he rejoined. "I will stay at home with you. Promise me to think no more of this. Do give it up."

"I won't give it up," she vehemently answered. "I shall go. And, what's more, I shall dance."

Lionel left her and sought his mother. Lady Verner was not very well that afternoon, and was keeping her room. He told her that he must decline the visit: he did not care to leave his wife.

Lady Verner made no observation for a few moments. A curious, almost pitying smile, was hovering on her lips.

"Lionel, you are a model husband. Your father was not a bad one, as husbands go; but—he would not have bent his neck to such treatment from me, as you take from Mrs. Verner."

"No?" returned Lionel, with good-humour.

"It is not right of you, Lionel, to leave me to go alone, with no one but Decima."

"Let Jan accompany you, mother."

"*Jan!*" uttered Lady Verner, in the extreme of astonishment. "I should be surprised to see Jan attempt to enter such a scene. Jan! I don't suppose he possesses a fitting coat and waistcoat."

Lionel quitted his mother, and bent his steps towards Jan Verner's. Not to solicit Jan's attendance upon Lady Verner to the festive scene, or to make close inquiries as to the state of Jan's wardrobe. No; Lionel had a more serious motive for his visit.

He found Jan and Master Cheese enjoying a sort of battle. The surgery looked as if it had been turned upside down, so much confusion reigned. White earthenware vessels of every shape and form, glass jars, huge cylinders, brass pots, metal pans, were scattered about in inextricable confusion. Master Cheese had recently got up a taste for chemical experiments, in which it appeared necessary to call into requisition an unlimited quantity of

accessories in the apparatus line. He had been entering upon an experiment that afternoon, when Jan came in unexpectedly, and caught him.

Not for the litter and confusion was Jan displeased, but because he found that Master Cheese had so bungled chemical properties in his head, so confounded one dangerous substance with another, that, five minutes later, the result would probably have been the blowing up of the surgery, and Master Cheese and his vessels with it. Jan was giving him a sharp and decisive word, not to attempt anything of the sort again until he could bring more correct knowledge to bear upon it, when Lionel interrupted them.

"I want to speak to you, Jan," he said.

"Here, you be off, and wash the powder from your hands," cried Jan to Master Cheese, who was looking ruefully put out. "I'll put the things straight."

The young gentleman departed. Lionel sat down on the only chair he could see—one probably kept for the accommodation of patients who mi want a few teeth drawn. Jan was rapidly reducing the plac order.

"What is it, Lionel?" he asked, when it was pretty clear again.

"Jan, you must see Sibylla. She wants to go to Deerham Hall to-morrow night."

"She can't go," replied Jan. "Nonsense."

"But she says she will go."

Jan leaned his long body over the counter, and brought his face nearly on a level with Lionel's, speaking slowly and impressively.

"If she goes, Lionel, it will kill her."

Lionel rose to depart. He was on his way to Verner's Pride. "I called in to tell you this, Jan, and to ask you to step up and remonstrate with her."

"Very well," said Jan. "Mark me, Lionel, *she must not go.* And if there's no other way of keeping her away, you, her husband, must forbid it. A little more excitement than usual, and there'll be another vessel on the lungs ruptured. If that happens, nothing can save her life. Keep her at home, by force if necessary: any way keep her."

"And what of the excitement that that will cause?" questioned Lionel. "It may be as fatal as the other."

"I don't know," returned Jan, speaking testily for once in his life, in the vexation the difficulty brought him. "My belief is, that Sibylla's mad. She'd never be so stupid, were she sane."

"Go to her, and see what you can do," concluded Lionel, as he turned away.

Jan proceeded to Deerham Court, and held an interview with Mrs. Verner. It was not of a very agreeable nature, neither did

much satisfaction ensue from it. After a few recriminating retorts to Jan's arguments, which he received as equably as though they had been compliments, Sibylla subsided into sullen silence. And when Jan left, he could not tell whether she still persisted in her project, or whether she had given it up.

It was late in the evening when Lionel returned to the Court: he had been detained at Verner's Pride. Sibylla appeared sullen still. She was in her own sitting-room, upstairs, and Lucy was bearing her company.

"Have you had any dinner?" inquired Lucy. *She* did not ask. She would not have asked had he been starving.

"I dined with John Massingbird," he replied. "Is my mother better, do you know?"

"Not much, I think," said Lucy. "Decima is sitting with her."

Lionel stood in his old attitude, his elbow on the mantel-piece by his wife's side, looking down at her. Her eyes were suspiciously bright, her cheeks wore their deepest hectic. It was often the case at this, the twilight hour of the evening. She wore a low dress, and the gold chain on her neck rose and fell with every breath. Lucy's neck was uncovered, too: a fair, pretty neck; one that did not give you the shivers, as poor Sibylla's did. Sibylla leaned back on the cushions of her chair, toying with a fragile hand-screen of feathers: Lucy, sitting on the opposite side, had been reading; but she put the book down when Lionel entered.

"John Massingbird desired me to ask you, Sibylla, if he should send you the first plate of grapes they cut."

"I would rather have the first bag of walnuts they shake," answered Sibylla. "I never cared for grapes."

"He can send you both," said Lionel: but an uncomfortable recollection came over him, of Jan's having told her she must not eat walnuts. For Jan to tell her not to do a thing, however—or, in fact, for any one else to do so—was the sure signal for Sibylla to do it.

"Does John Massingbird intend to go to-morrow evening?" inquired Sibylla.

"To Deerham Hall, do you mean? John Massingbird has not received an invitation."

"What's that for?" quickly asked Sibylla.

"Some whim of Miss Hautley's, I suppose. The cards have been issued very partially. John says it is just as well he did not get one, for he should either not have responded to it, or else made his appearance there with his clay pipe."

Lucy laughed.

"I would not have gone with him; I don't like him well enough," resentfully spoke Sibylla; "but as he is not going, he can lend me

my own carriage for the occasion—at least, the carriage that was my own. I dislike those hired old things."

The words struck on Lionel as a knell. He foresaw trouble. "Sibylla," he gravely said, "I have been speaking to Jan. He——"

"Yes, you have!" she vehemently interrupted, her pent-up anger bursting forth. "You went to him, and sent him here, and told him what to say,—all on purpose to cross me. It is wicked of you to be so jealous of my having a little pleasure."

"Jealous of—I don't understand you, Sibylla."

"You won't understand me, you mean. Never mind! never mind!"

"Sibylla," he said, bending his head slightly towards her, and speaking in low, persuasive accents, "I *cannot* let you go to-morrow night. If I cared for you less, I might suffer you to risk it. I have given up going, and——"

"You never meant to go," she interrupted.

"Yes I did: to please my mother. But that is of no consequence——"

"I tell you, you never meant to go, Lionel Verner!" she passionately burst forth. "You are stopping at home on purpose to be with Lucy Tempest. An arranged plan between you and her. Her society is more to you than any you would find at Deerham Hall."

Lucy looked up with a start—a sort of shiver—her sweet brown eyes open with innocent wonder. Then the full sense of the words appeared to penetrate to her, and her face grew hot and scarlet. She said nothing. She rose quietly, not hurriedly, took up the book she had put down on the table, and quietly left the room.

Lionel's face was glowing, too—glowing with indignation. He bit his lips for calmness, leaving the mark there for hours afterwards. He strove manfully with his angry spirit: it was rising up to open rebellion. A minute, and the composure of self-control came to him. He stood before his wife, his arms folded.

"You are my wife," he said. "I am bound to defend, to excuse you so far as I may; but these insults to Lucy Tempest I cannot excuse. She is the daughter of my dead father's dearest friend; she is living here under the protection of my mother, and it is incumbent upon me to put a stop to these scenes, so far as she is concerned. If I cannot do it in one way, I must in another."

"You know that she and you would like to stay at home together—and get the rest of us out."

"Be silent!" he said in sterner tones than he had ever used to her. "You cannot reflect upon what you are saying. Accuse me as you please; I will bear it patiently, if I can; but Miss Tempest

shall be spared. You *know* how utterly unfounded are such thoughts; you know that she is refined, gentle, single-hearted; that all her thoughts to you, as my wife, are those of friendship and kindness. What would my mother think were she to hear this?"

Sibylla made no reply.

"You have never seen a look or heard a word pass between me and Lucy Tempest that was not of the most open nature, entirely compatible with her position, that of a modest and refined gentlewoman, and of mine, as your husband. I think you must be mad, Sibylla."

The very words Jan had used. If such temperaments do not deserve the name of madness, they are nearly allied to it. Lionel spoke with emotion: it all but over-mastered him, as he went back to his place by the mantel-piece.

"I shall leave this residence as speedily as possible," he said, "giving some trivial excuse to my mother for the step. I see no other way to put an end to this."

Sibylla, her mood changing, burst into tears. He quitted the room, leaving her sobbing fractiously on the cushion of the chair, and went down to the drawing-room.

He did not care where he went, or what became of him: it is an unhappy thing when affairs get to that miserable point, when the mind has neither ease nor comfort anywhere. At the first moment of entering, he thought the room was empty, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the twilight, he discerned the form of some one standing at the distant window. It was Lucy Tempest. Lionel went straight up to her: he felt that some apology or notice from him was due to her. She was crying bitterly, and turned to him before he could speak.

"Mr. Verner, I feel my position keenly. I would not remain here to make things unpleasant to your wife, for the whole world. But I cannot help myself. I have nowhere to go until papa returns to Europe."

"Lucy, let me say a word to you," he whispered, his tones impeded, his breath coming fast. "There are moments in a man's lifetime when he must *be true;* when the artificial gloss thrown on social intercourse fades out of sight. This is one of them."

Her tears fell more quietly. "I am so very sorry!" she continued to murmur.

"Were you other than what you are, I might meet you with some of this artifice; I might pretend not to know aught of what has been said, I might attempt some elaborate apology. It would be worse than folly from me to you. Let me tell you, that could I have shielded you from this insult with my life, I would have done it."

"Yes, yes," she hurriedly answered.

"You will not mistake me. As the daughter of my father's dearest friend, as my mother's honoured guest, I speak to you. I speak to you as one whom I am bound to protect from harm and insult, only in a less degree than I would protect my wife. You will do me the justice to believe it."

"I know it. Indeed I do not blame you."

"Lucy, I would have prevented this, had it been in my power. But it was not. I could not help it. All I can do is, to take steps that it shall not occur again. I scarcely know what I am saying to you. My life, what with one thing and another, is well-nigh wearied out."

Lucy had long seen that. But she did not say so. "It will not be long now before papa is at home," she answered, "and then I shall leave Deerham Court. Thank you for speaking to me," she simply said, as she was turning to leave the room.

He took both her hands in his; he drew her nearer to him; his head was bent down to hers. Was he tempted to take a caress from her sweet face, as he had taken it years ago? Perhaps he was. But Lionel Verner was not one to lose his self-control where there was a necessity for his retaining it. His position was different now from what it had been then; and, if the temptation was strong, it was kept in check, and Lucy never knew that it had been there.

"You will forget it for my sake, Lucy? You will not resent it upon her? She is very ill."

"It is what I wish to do," she gently replied. "I do not know what foolish things I might not say, were I suffering like Mrs. Verner."

"God for ever bless you, Lucy!" he murmured. "May your future life be more fortunate than mine is."

Relinquishing her hands, he watched her disappear through the darkness of the room. She was dearer to him than his own life; he loved her better than all earthly things. That the knowledge was all too evident then, he was bitterly feeling, and he could not suppress it. He could neither suppress the knowledge, nor the fact; it had been very present with him for long and long. He could not help it, as he said. He believed, in his honest heart, that he had not encouraged the passion; that it had taken root and grown unconsciously to himself. He would have driven it away, had it been in his power; he would drive it away now, could he do so by any amount of energy or will. But it could not be. And Lionel Verner leaned in the dark against the window-frame, resolving to do as he had done before—had done all along. To suppress it ever; to ignore it as far as might be; and to do his duty as honestly and lovingly by his wife, as though the love were not there.

He *had* been enabled to do this hitherto, and he would do so still: God helping him.

CHAPTER LXV.

GOING TO THE BALL.

It was the day of the *fête* at Deerham Hall. Sibylla awoke in an amiable mood, unusually so for her; and Lionel, as he dressed, talked to her gravely and kindly, urging upon her the necessity of relinquishing her determination to be present. It appeared that she was also reasonable that morning, as well as amiable, for she listened to him, and at length voluntarily said she would think no more about it.

"But you must afford me some treat in place of it," she immediately added. "Will you promise to take me for a whole day next week to Heartbury?"

"Willingly," replied Lionel. "There is to be a morning concert at Heartbury next Tuesday. If you feel well enough, we can attend that."

He did not think morning concerts and the nervous fatigue they sometimes entail, particularly desirable for his wife; but, compared with hot ballrooms and the night air, they seemed harmless. Sibylla liked morning concerts almost as much as Master Cheese liked tarts, as she liked anything that afforded a pretext for dress and display.

"Mind, Lionel, you *promise* to take me," she reiterated.

"Yes."

Sibylla continued in a remarkably quiet, not to say affable, temper all day. Lionel went out, but returned home to dinner. By-and-by Lady Verner and Decima retired to dress. Lucy went up with Decima, and Lionel remained with his wife.

When they came down, Sibylla was asleep on the sofa. Lady Verner wore some of the magnificent yet quiet attire that had belonged to her gayer days, Decima was in white. Lionel put on his hat, and went out to hand them into the carriage. As he did so, the aspect of his sister's face struck him.

"What is the matter, Decima?" he exclaimed. "You look perfectly white."

She only smiled in answer: a forced, unnatural smile, as it appeared to Lionel. But he said no more: he thought the white hue might be only a shadow cast by the moonlight. Lady Verner looked from the carriage to ask a question.

"Is Jan really going, do you know, Lionel? Lucy says she thinks he is. I do hope and trust that he will be attired like a Christian, if he is absurd enough to appear."

"I think I'll go and see," answered Lionel, a smile crossing his face. "Take care, Catherine!"

Old Catherine, who had come out with shawls, was dangerously near the wheels—and the horses were on the point of starting. She stepped back, and the carriage drove on.

The bustle had aroused Sibylla. She rose to look from the window: saw the carriage depart, saw Catherine come in, saw Lionel walk away towards Deerham. It was all clearly distinct in the moonlight. Lucy Tempest was looking from the other window.

"What a lovely night it is!" Lucy exclaimed. "I should not mind a drive of ten miles, such a night as this."

"And yet they choose to say that going out would hurt me!" spoke Sibylla, resentfully. "They do it on purpose to vex me."

Lucy preferred to ignore the subject: it was not her business to enter into it one way or the other. She drew from the window with a half-sigh: it seemed almost a pity to shut out that pleasant moonlight: turned, and stirred the fire into a blaze. Sibylla's chilly nature caused them to enter upon evening fires before other people thought of them.

"Shall I ring for lights, Mrs. Verner?"

"I suppose it's time, and past time," was Sibylla's answer. "I must have been asleep ever so long."

Catherine brought them in, and drew the window-curtains. The man-servant had gone in attendance on his mistress. Lady Verner's moderate household consisted now of four domestics only: Thérèse, Catherine, the cook, and the man-servant. Sibylla quitted the room, and Lucy drew a chair to the fire, and fell into a reverie.

She was aroused by the door opening again. It proved to be Catherine with the tea-things. "I thought I would bring them in, and then they'll be ready," remarked she. "You can please to ring, miss, when you want the urn."

Lucy simply nodded; she did not know when it would please Mrs. Verner to take tea; and Catherine returned to the kitchen, to enjoy a social *tête-à-tête* supper with the cook. Mademoiselle Thérèse, taking advantage of her mistress's absence, had gone out for the rest of the evening. The two servants sat on and chatted together: so long, that Catherine openly wondered at the urn not having been called for.

"They must both have gone to sleep, I should think," quoth she. "Miss Lucy over the fire in the sitting-room, and Mr. Lionel's wife over hers, upstairs. I have not heard her come down——"

Catherine stopped. The cook had started up, her eyes fixed on the doorway. Catherine hastily turned, and an involuntary exclamation broke from her lips.

Standing there was Mrs. Verner: looking like—more like a bedecked skeleton than anything else. She was in fairy attire. A white gossamer robe, with shining ornaments, and a wreath that seemed to sparkle with dewdrops on her head. But her arms were wasted; the bones of her poor neck seemed to rattle as they heaved painfully under the gems clasped round it; and her face had not so much as the faintest tinge of hectic, but was utterly colourless; wan; ghastly. A distressing sight to look upon, was she, as she stood there: she and her festal attire were so completely at variance. She came forward, before the servants could recover from their astonishment.

"Where's Richard?" she asked, speaking in low, subdued tones, as if fearing to be heard—though there was no one in the house to hear her, except Lucy Tempest. And probably it was her wish to avoid all attention to her proceeding, that caused her to come down stealthily to the servants, instead of ringing for them.

"Richard has not come back, ma'am," answered Catherine. "We have just been saying that he'll most likely stop up there with the Hall servants until my lady returns."

"Not back?" echoed Sibylla. "Cook, you must go out for me," she imperiously added, after a moment's pause. "Go to Dean's and order one of their flys here directly. Wait, and come back with it."

The cook, a simple sort of young woman, except in her own special department, did not demur, or appear to question in the least the wisdom of the order. Catherine questioned it very much indeed; but while she hesitated what to do, whether to stop the cook, or to venture on a remonstrance with Mrs. Verner, or to appeal to Miss Tempest to do it, the cook was gone. Servants are not particular in country places, and the girl went straight out as she was, without staying to put anything on.

Sibylla appeared to be shivering. She took up her station in front of the fire, holding out her hands to the blaze.

"The fire in my dressing-room went out," she remarked. "Take care that you make up a large one by the time I return."

"You'll never go, ma'am!" cried old Catherine, breaking through her reserve. "You are not strong enough."

"Mind your own business," sharply retorted Sibylla. "Do you think I don't know my own feelings, whether I am strong, or whether I am not? I am as strong as you are."

Catherine dared no more. Sibylla cowered over the fire, her head half turned as she glanced at the table.

"What's that?" she suddenly cried, pointing to the contents of a jug.

"It's beer, ma'am," answered Catherine. "That stupid girl

drew just as much as if Richard and Thérèse had been at home. Maybe Thérèse will be in yet for supper."

"Give me a glass of it. I am thirsty."

Again old Catherine hesitated. Beer had been expressly forbidden to Mrs. Verner. It always made her cough frightfully.

"You know, ma'am, the doctors have said——"

"Will you hold your tongue? And give me what I require? You are as bad as Mr. Verner."

Catherine reached a tumbler, half filled it, and handed it to her. Mrs. Verner did not take it.

"Fill it," she said.

So old Catherine, much against her will, had to fill it, and Sibylla drained the glass. In truth, she was constantly thirsty, and seemed to have an inward fever for ever upon her. She shivered as she put down the glass.

"Go and find my opera cloak, Catherine. It must have dropped on the stairs. I know I put it on as I left my room."

Catherine quitted the kitchen on the errand. She would have liked to close the door after her; but it happened to be pushed quite back with a chair against it; and to pointedly shut it might have been noticed by Sibylla. She found the opera cloak lying on the landing, near Sibylla's bedroom door. Catching it up, she stole down noiselessly into the presence of Miss Tempest.

Lucy looked astonished. She sat at the table reading, waiting with all patience the entrance of Sibylla, ere she made tea. To see Catherine stealing in with her finger to her lips excited her wonder.

"Miss Lucy, she's going to the ball," was the old servant's salutation, as she approached Lucy, and spoke in the faintest whisper. "She is shivering over the kitchen fire, with hardly a bit of gown to her back, so far as warmth goes. Here's her opera cloak: she dropped it coming down. Cook's gone out for a fly."

"Do you mean Mrs. Verner?" asked the startled girl.

"Why, of course I do," answered Catherine. "She has been upstairs all this while, and has dressed herself alone. She must not go, Miss Lucy. She's looking like a ghost. What will Mr. Verner say to us if we let her go! It may just be her death."

Lucy clasped her hands in consternation. "Catherine, what can we do? We have no influence over her. She would not listen to us for a moment. If we could only find Mr. Verner!"

"He was going round to Mr. Jan's when my lady drove off. I heard him say so. Miss Lucy, *I* can't go after him: she'd find me out: I can't leave her, or leave the house. But he ought to be here."

Did the woman mean to suggest that Lucy should go herself?

Lucy may have thought so: or, perhaps, the idea occurred to her without help from Catherine.

"I will go, Catherine," she whispered. "I don't mind it. It is nearly as light as day outside, and I shall soon be at Mr Jan's. Go back to Mrs. Verner."

Feeling that not a moment must be lost; feeling that Mrs. Verner ought to be stopped at all hazards for her own sake, Lucy caught up a shawl and a sun-bonnet of Lady Verner's that happened to be in the hall, and, thus hastily attired, went out. Speeding swiftly down the moonlit road, she soon gained Deerham, and turned to the house of Dr. West. A light in the surgery guided her at once to that room.

But the light alone was there. No one was present to receive its benefit or to answer intruders. Lucy knocked pretty loudly on the counter without bringing forth any result. Apparently she was not heard: perhaps from the fact that the sound was drowned in the noise of some fizzing and popping which seemed to be going on in the next room—Jan's bedroom. Consideration for Mrs. Verner put ceremony out of the question: in fact, Lucy was not given at the best of times to stand much upon that: and she stepped round the counter, and knocked briskly at the door. Possibly Lionel might be in there with Jan.

Lionel was not there; nor Jan, either. The door was gingerly opened about two inches by Master Cheese, who was enveloped in a great white apron and white oversleeves. His face looked red and confused as it peeped out, as does that of one who is caught at some forbidden mischief: and Lucy obtained sight of a perfect mass of vessels, brass, earthenware, glass, and other things, with which the room was strewed. In point of fact, Master Cheese, believing he was safe from Jan's supervision for some hours, had seized the occasion to plunge into his forbidden chemical researches again, and had taken French leave to use Jan's bedroom for the purpose, the surgery being limited for space.

"What do you want?" cried he roughly, staring at Lucy.

"Is Mr. Verner here?" she asked.

Then Master Cheese knew the voice, and condescended a sort of apology for his abruptness.

"I didn't know you, Miss Tempest, in that fright of a bonnet," said he, walking forth and closing the bedroom door behind him. "Mr. Verner's not here."

"Do you happen to know where he is?" asked Lucy. "He said he was coming here, an hour ago."

"So he did come here; and saw Jan. Jan's gone to the ball. And Miss Deb and Miss Amilly have gone to a party at Heartbury."

"Is he?" returned Lucy, referring to Jan, and surprised to hear the news; balls not being in Jan's line.

"*I* can't make it out," remarked Master Cheese. "He and Sir Edmund used to be cronies, I think; so I suppose that has taken him. But I am glad they are all off: it gives me a whole evening to myself. He and Mr. Verner went away together."

"I wish very much to find Mr. Verner," said Lucy. "It is of great consequence that I should see him. I suppose—you—could not—go and look for him, Master Cheese?" she added pleadingly.

"Couldn't do it," responded Master Cheese, thinking of his forbidden chemicals. "When Jan's away, I am chief, you know, Miss Tempest. Some cases of broken legs may be brought in, for anything I can tell."

Lucy wished him good night and turned away. She hesitated at the corner of the street, gazing up and down. To start on a search for Lionel, appeared to be about as hopeful a project as that renowned search in proverb, looking for a needle in a bottle of hay. The custom in Deerham was, not to light the lamps on a moonlight night, so the street, as Lucy glanced on either side, lay white and quiet; no glare to disturb its peace, except from a few shops, not yet closed. Mrs. Duff's, opposite, was among the latter: and her son, Mr. Dan, appeared to be taking a little tumbling recreation on the flags before the bay-window. Lucy crossed over to him.

"Dan," said she, "do you happen to have seen Mr. Verner pass lately?"

Dan, just then on his head, turned himself upside down, and alighted on his feet, humble and subdued. "Please, miss, I see him awhile agone along of Mr. Jan," was the answer, pulling his hair by way of salutation. "They went that way. Mr. Jan was all in black, he was."

The boy pointed towards Deerham Hall. There was no doubt that Jan was then on his way there. But the question for Lucy was —where had Lionel gone to?

She could not tell: the very speculating upon it was unprofitable, since it could lead to no certainty. Lucy turned homewards, walking quickly.

She had left the houses behind her, when she discerned, before her in the distance, a form which instinct—perhaps some dearer feeling—told her was that of him of whom she was in search. He was walking with a slow, leisurely step towards home. Lucy's heart bounded—that it did so still at his sight, as it had done in the earlier days, was no fault of hers: Heaven knew that she had striven and prayed against it. When she caught him up she was out of breath, so swiftly had she sped.

"Lucy!" he exclaimed. "*Lucy!* What are you doing here?"

"I came out to look for you," she simply said: "there was no one else at home to come. I went to Jan's, thinking you might be there. Mrs. Verner has dressed herself to go to Sir Edmund's. You may be in time to stop her, if you make haste."

With a half-uttered exclamation, Lionel was speeding off, when he appeared to remember Lucy. He turned to take her with him.

"No," said Lucy, stopping. "I could not go as quickly as you: and a minute, more or less, may make all the difference. There is nothing to harm me. Make the best of your way. It is for your wife's sake."

There was good sense in all she said, and Lionel started off with a fleet step. Before Lucy had quite gained the Court, she saw him coming back to meet her. He drew her hand within his arm in silence, and kept his own upon it for an instant's grateful pressure.

"Thank you, Lucy, for what you have done. Thank you now and ever. I was too late."

"Is Mrs. Verner gone?"

"She has been gone these ten minutes, Catherine says. A fly was found immediately."

They turned into the house; into the sitting-room. Lucy threw off the large shawl and the shapeless bonnet; at any other moment she would have laughed at the figure she must have looked in them. The tea-things still waited on the table.

"Shall I make you some tea?" she asked.

Lionel shook his head. "I must go up and dress. I shall go after Sibylla."

CHAPTER LXVI.

DECIMA'S ROMANCE.

If the fair forms crowding to the *fête* at Deerham Hall had but known how near that *fête* was to being shorn of its master's presence, they had gone less hopefully. Scarcely one of the dowagers and chaperons bidden to it but cast a longing eye to the heir, for their daughters' sake; scarcely a daughter but experienced a fluttering of the heart, as the fond fancy presented itself that she might be singled out as the chosen partner of Sir Edmund Hautley: for the night, at any rate; and—perhaps—for the future also. But when the clock struck six that evening, Sir Edmund Hautley had not arrived.

Miss Hautley was in a fever,—as nearly as it is in the nature of

a cold single lady of fifty-eight to go, when some overwhelming disappointment falls abruptly upon her. According to arranged plans, Sir Edmund was to have been at home by middle day, crossing by the night boat from the Continent. Middle day came and went; afternoon came and went; evening came—and he had *not* come. Miss Hautley would have set the telegraph to work, had she known where to set it to.

But good luck was in store for her. A train, arriving between six and seven, brought him; and his carriage—the carriage of his late father, which had been waiting at the station since eleven o'clock in the morning—conveyed him home.

Considerably astonished was Sir Edmund to find the programme which had been carved out for the night's amusement. He did not like it; it jarred upon his sense of propriety; and he spoke a hint of this to Miss Hautley. It was the death of his father which had called him home; a father with whom he had lived for the last few years of his life upon terms of estrangement—at any rate, upon one point; was it seemly that his inauguration should be one of gaiety? Yes, Miss Hautley decisively answered. Their friends were not meeting to bewail Sir Rufus's death; *that* took place months ago; but to welcome his, Sir Edmund's, return, and his entrance on his inheritance.

Sir Edmund—a sunny-tempered, yielding man, the very opposite in spirit to his dead father, to his living aunt—conceded the point; doing it with all the better grace, perhaps, that there was now no help for it. In an hour's time the guests would be arriving. Miss Hautley inquired curiously as to the point upon which he and Sir Rufus had been at issue: she had never been able to learn it from her brother. Neither did it now appear that she was likely to learn it from Sir Edmund. It was a personal matter, he said, a smile crossing his lips as he spoke: one entirely between himself and his father, and he could not speak of it. It had driven him abroad she believed, Miss Hautley remarked, vexed that she was still to remain in the dark. Yes, acquiesced Sir Edmund: it had driven him abroad and kept him there.

He was ready, and stood in his place to receive his guests; a tall man, of some five-and-thirty years, with a handsome face and pleasant smile upon it. He greeted his old friends cordially, those with whom he had been intimate, and was laughing and talking with the Countess of Elmsley when the announcement "Lady and Miss Verner" caught his ear.

It caused him to turn abruptly. Breaking off in the midst of a sentence, he left the countess and went to meet those who had entered. Lady Verner's greeting was somewhat elaborate, and he looked round impatiently for Decima.

She stood behind her mother. Decima? Was *that* Decima? What had she done to her cheeks? They wore the hectic that was all too characteristic of Sibylla's. Sir Edmund took her hand.

"I trust you are well?"

"Quite well," was her murmured answer, drawing away the hand which had barely touched his.

Nothing could be more quiet than the meeting, nothing more simple than the words spoken; nothing, it may be said, more commonplace. But that Decima was suffering from some intense agitation, there could be no doubt; and the next moment her face had turned of that same ghastly hue which had startled her brother Lionel when he handed her into the carriage. Sir Edmund remained with them for a few minutes, and then was called off to receive other guests.

"Have you forgotten how to dance, Edmund?"

The question came from Miss Hautley, disturbing him as he made the centre of a group to whom he was speaking of his Indian life.

"I don't suppose I have," he said, turning to her. "Why?"

"People are thinking so," said Miss Hautley. "The music has been breaking into fresh attempts this half-hour, and impatience is getting irrepressible. They cannot begin, Edmund, without you. Your partner is waiting."

"My partner?" reiterated Sir Edmund. "I have asked no one yet."

"But I have, for you. At least, I have as good as done it. Lady Constance——"

"Oh, my dear aunt, you are very kind," he hastily interrupted; "but when I do dance—which is a rare occurrence—I like to choose my own partner. I must do so now."

"Well, take care, then," was the answer of Miss Hautley, not deeming it necessary to drop her voice in the least. "The room is anxious to see upon whom your choice will be fixed: it may be a type, they are saying, of what another choice of yours may be by-and-by."

Sir Edmund laughed good-humouredly. "Then I must walk round deliberately and look out for myself—as it is said some of our royal reigning potentates have done. Thank you for the hint."

But, instead of walking round deliberately, Sir Edmund Hautley proceeded straight to one point of the room, halting before Lady Verner and Decima. He bent to the former, speaking a few words jokingly.

"I am bidden to fix upon a partner, Lady Verner. May it be your daughter?"

Lady Verner looked at Decima. "She so seldom dances. I do not think you will persuade her."

"I think I can," he softly said, bending to Decima and holding out his arm. And Decima rose and put hers into it without a word.

"How capricious she is!" remarked Lady Verner to the Countess of Elmsley, who was sitting next her. "If I had pressed her, she would probably have said 'No.' As she has done so many times."

He took his place at the head of the room, Decima by his side in her white silk robes; Decima, with her wondrous beauty, and the hectic on her cheeks again. Many an envious pair of eyes was cast to her. "That dreadful old maid, Decima Verner!" was amongst the compliments launched at her. "*She* to usurp him! How had my Lady Verner manœuvred for it?"

But Sir Edmund did not appear dissatisfied with his partner, if the room was. He paid a great deal more attention to her than he did to the dance: the latter he put out more than once, his head and eyes bent, whispering to Decima.

"Are you afraid of the night air?" he asked, when the dance was over, leading her through the conservatory.

"No. It never hurts me."

He proceeded round the gravel path to the other side of the house: there he opened the glass doors of a room and entered it. It led into another, bright with fire.

"It is my own sitting-room," he observed. "No one will intrude upon us here."

He stirred the fire into a blaze. Then he turned to her, as she stood on the hearthrug.

"Decima!"

It was only a simple name; but Sir Edmund's whole frame betrayed emotion as he spoke it. He clasped her to him with a strangely fond gesture, and bent his face to hers.

"I left my farewell on your lips when I quitted you, Decima. I must take my welcome from them now."

She burst into tears as she clung to him. "Sir Rufus sent for me when he was dying," she whispered. "Edmund, he said he was sorry to have opposed you; he said he would not do so if the time could come over again."

"I know it," he answered. "I have his full consent; nay, his blessing. They are only a few words, but they were the last he ever wrote. You shall see them, Decima; he calls you my future wife, Lady Hautley. Oh, my darling! what a long, cruel separation it has been!"

Ay! far longer, more cruel for Decima than for him. She was feeling it bitterly now, as the tears streamed down her face. Sir Edmund placed her in a chair. He hung over her, scarcely less agitated than she, soothing her with all the fondness of his true

heart, with the sweet words she had once known so well. He turned to the door when she grew calmer.

"I am going to bring Lady Verner here. It is time she knew it."

Not through the garden this time, but through the open passages of the house, lined with servants, went Sir Edmund. Lady Verner was where they left her. He made his way to her, and held his arm out that she might take it.

"Will you allow me to monopolize you for a few minutes?" he said. "I have a tale to tell in which you may feel interested."

"About India?" she asked, as she rose. "I suppose you used to meet some of my old friends there?"

"Not about India," he answered, leading her from the room. "India can wait. About some one nearer and dearer to us than any now in India. Lady Verner, when I asked you just now to permit me to choose your daughter as a partner, I could have added for life. Will you give Decima to me?"

Had Sir Edmund Hautley asked for herself, Lady Verner could scarcely have been more astonished. He poured into her ear the whole tale of their old love, the inveterate opposition of Sir Rufus—which had driven him abroad. It had never been made known to Lady Verner.

"It was *that* caused you to exile yourself!" she reiterated in amazement.

"It was, Lady Verner. Marry in opposition to my father, I would not—and had I been willing to brave him, Decima never would. So I left my home: I left Decima: my father perfectly understanding that our engagement existed still; that it only lay in abeyance until happier times. When he was dying, he repented his harshness, and recalled his interdict; by letter to me, personally to Decima. He died with a blessing for us both on his lips. Jan can tell you so."

"What has Jan to do with it?" exclaimed Lady Verner.

"Sir Rufus made a confidant of Jan, and charged him with the message to me. It was Jan who enclosed to me the few words my father was able to trace."

"I think Jan might have imparted the secret to me," resentfully spoke Lady Verner. "It is just like ungrateful Jan."

"Jan ungrateful!—never!" spoke Sir Edmund, warmly. "There's not a truer heart breathing than Jan's. It was not his secret, and I expect he did not consider himself at liberty to tell even you. Decima would have imparted it to you years ago, when I went away, but for one thing."

"What may that have been?" asked Lady Verner.

"We feared, she and I, that your pride would be so wounded, and not unjustly, at my father's unreasonable opposition, that you

might, in retaliation, forbid the alliance, then and always. You see I am candid with you, Lady Verner."

"Decima ought to have told me," was all the reply given by Lady Verner.

"And Decima would have told you, at all hazards, but for my urgent entreaties. The blame is wholly mine, Lady Verner. You must forgive me."

"In what lay the objection of Sir Rufus?" she asked.

"I honestly believe that it arose entirely from that dogged self-will—may I be forgiven for speaking thus irreverently of my dead father!—which was his great characteristic through life. It was I who chose Decima, not he; and therefore my father opposed it. To Decima and to Decima's family he could not have any possible objection—in fact, he had not any. But he liked to oppose his will to mine. I—if I know anything of myself—am the very reverse of self-willed, and I had always yielded to him. No question, until this, had ever arisen that was of vital importance to my life and its happiness."

"Sir Rufus may have resented her want of fortune," remarked Lady Verner.

"I think not. He was not a covetous or a selfish man; and our revenues are such that I can make ample settlements on my wife. No, it was self-will. But it is all over, and I can openly claim her. You will give her to me, Lady Verner?"

"I suppose I must," was the reply of my lady. "But people have been calling her an old maid."

Sir Edmund laughed. "How they will be disappointed! Some of their eyes may be opened to-night. I shall not deem it necessary to make a secret of our engagement now."

"You must permit me to ask one question, Sir Edmund. Have you and Decima corresponded with each other?"

"No. We separated for the time entirely. The engagement existing in our own hearts alone."

"I am glad to hear it. I did *not* think Decima would have carried on a correspondence unknown to me."

"I am certain she would not. And for that reason I never asked her to do it. Until I met Decima to-night, Lady Verner, we have had no communication with each other since I left home. But I am quite sure that neither of us has doubted the other for a single moment."

"It has been a long time to wait," mused Lady Verner, as they entered the presence of Decima, who started up to receive them.

CHAPTER LXVII.

WAS IT A SPECTRE?

WHEN they returned to the rooms, Sir Edmund with Decima, Lady Verner by her daughter's side, the first object that met them was Jan. Jan at a ball! Lady Verner lifted her eyebrows: she had never believed that Jan would really show himself where he must be so entirely out of place. But there Jan was: in decent dress, too: black clothes, and a white necktie and gloves. It's true, the bow of his necktie was upside down, and the gloves had their thumbs nearly out. Jan's great hands seized both Sir Edmund's.

"I'm uncommon glad you are back!" cried he—which was his polite phrase for expressing satisfaction.

"So am I, Jan," heartily answered Sir Edmund. "I have never had a real friend, Jan, since I left you."

"We can be friends still," said plain Jan.

"Ay," said Sir Edmund, meaningly, "and brothers." But the last word was spoken in Jan's ear alone, for they were in a crowd now.

"To see you here very much surprises me, Jan," remarked Lady Verner, severely. "I hope you will contrive to behave properly."

Lady Mary Elmsley, then standing with them, laughed. "Are you afraid that he will not do so, Lady Verner?"

"He was not made for society," said Lady Verner, with increased asperity.

"Nor society for me," returned Jan, good-humouredly. "I would rather be watching a case of fever."

"Oh, Jan!" cried Lady Mary, laughing still.

"So I would," repeated Jan. "At somebody's bedside, in my easy coat, I feel at home. And I feel that I am doing good: that's more. *This* is nothing but waste of time."

"You hear?" appealed Lady Verner to them, as if Jan's avowal were a proof of her assertion that he and society were antagonistic to each other. "*I* wonder the thought occurred to you to attire yourself passably," she added, her face retaining its vexation. "Had any one asked me, I should have given it as my opinion that you had nothing fit to appear in."

"I had these," returned Jan, looking down at his clothes. "Won't they do? It's my funeral suit."

The unconscious matter-of-fact style of Jan's avowal was beyond everything. Lady Verner was struck dumb, Sir Edmund smiled, and Mary Elmsley laughed outright.

"Oh, Jan!" said she, "you'll be a child all the days of your life. What do you mean by your 'funeral suit'?"

"Anybody might know that," was Jan's answer to Lady Mary. "It's the suit I keep for funerals. A doctor is always getting asked to attend them: and if he does not go, he offends people."

"You might have kept the information to yourself," rebuked Lady Verner.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" asked Jan. "Aren't they good enough to come in?"

He turned his head, to get a backward glance at the said suit. Sir Edmund laid his hand affectionately on his shoulder. Young as Jan had been before Edmund Hautley went out, they had lived close friends. "The clothes are all right, Jan. And if you had come without a coat at all, you would have been equally welcome to me."

"I should not have gone to this sort of thing anywhere else, you know: it is not in my line, as my mother says. I came to see you."

"And I would rather see you, Jan, than any one else in the room—with one exception," was the reply of Sir Edmund. "I am sorry not to see Lionel."

"He couldn't come," answered Jan. "His wife turned crusty, and said she'd come if he did—something of that sort—and so he stayed at home. She is very ill, and wants to ignore it, and go out all the same. It is not fit that she should."

"Pray do you mean to dance, Jan?" inquired Lady Verner, the question being put ironically.

"I?" returned Jan. "Who'd dance with me?"

"I'll dance with you, Jan," said Lady Mary.

Jan shook his head. "I might get my feet entangled in the petticoats."

"Not you, Jan," said Sir Edmund, laughing. "I should risk that, if a lady asked me."

"She wouldn't care to dance with me," returned Jan, looking at Mary Elmsley. "She only says it out of good-nature."

"No, Jan, I don't think I do," frankly avowed Lady Mary. "I should like to dance with you."

"I'd stand up with you, if I stood up with anybody," replied Jan. "But where's the good of it? I don't know the figures, and should only put you out, as well as every one else."

So, what with his ignorance of the figures, and his dreaded awkwardness amidst the trains, Jan was allowed to rest in peace. Mary Elmsley told him that if he would come over sometimes to their house of an evening, she and her young sisters would practise the figures with him, so that he might learn them. It was Jan's turn to

laugh now. The notion of his practising dancing, or having evenings to waste on it, amused him considerably.

"Go to your house to learn dancing!" echoed he. "Folks would be for putting me into a lunatic asylum. If I do find an hour to myself any odd evening, I have to get to my dissecting. I went shares the other day in a beautiful subject——"

"I don't think you need tell me of that, Jan," interrupted Lady Mary, keeping her countenance.

"I wonder you talk to him, Mary," observed Lady Verner, feeling thoroughly ashamed of Jan, and believing that every one else did. "You hear how he repays you. He means it for good breeding, perhaps."

"I don't mean it for rudeness, at any rate," returned Jan. "Lady Mary knows that. Don't you?" he added, turning to her.

A strangely thrilling expression in her eyes as she looked at him was her only answer. "I would rather have that sort of rudeness from you, Jan," said she, "than the world's politeness. There is so much of false——"

Mary Elmsley's sentence was never concluded. What was it that had broken in upon them? What object was that, gliding into the room like a ghost, on whom all eyes were strained with a terrible fascination? *Was* it a ghost? It appeared ghastly enough for one. Was it one of Jan's "subjects" come after him to the ball? It looked more like that than anything else. A skeleton bedizened with jewels.

"She's mad!" exclaimed Jan, who was the first to recover his speech.

"What is it?" ejaculated Sir Edmund, gazing with something very like fear, as the spectre bore down towards him.

"It is my brother's wife," explained Jan. "You may see how fit she is to come."

There was no time for more. Sibylla had her hand held out to Sir Edmund, a wan smile on her ghastly face. His hesitation, his evident discomposure, as he took it, were not lost upon her.

"You have forgotten me, Sir Edmund: but I should have known you anywhere. Your face is bronzed, and it is the only change. Am *I* so changed?"

"Yes; greatly changed," was his involuntary acknowledgment in his surprise. "I should not have recognized you for the Sibylla West of those old days."

"I was at an age to change," she said. "I——"

The words were stopped by a fit of coughing. Not the ordinary cough, more or less violent, that we hear in every-day life; but the cough that tells its tale of the hopeless state within. She had discarded her opera cloak, and stood there, *très décolletée*, as the

French would say; shivering palpably. Sir Edmund Hautley, quitting Decima, took her hand compassionately and led her to a seat.

Mrs. Verner did not like the attention. Pity, compassion, was in every line of his face—in every gesture of his gentle hand: and she resented it.

"I am not ill," she declared to Sir Edmund, between the paroxysms of her distressing cough. "The wind seemed to take my throat as I got out of the fly, and it is making me cough a little, but I am not ill. Has Jan been telling you that I am?"

She turned fiercely on Jan as she spoke. Jan had followed her to her chair, and stood near her; he may have deemed that so evident an invalid should possess a doctor at hand. A good thing that Jan was of easy temperament; otherwise there might have been perpetual open warfare between him and Sibylla. She did not spare to him her sarcasms and her insults; but never, in all Jan's intercourse with her, had he resented them.

"No one has told me anything about you in particular, Mrs. Verner," was the reply of Sir Edmund. "I see that you look delicate."

"I am not delicate," she said sharply. "It is nothing. I should be very well, if it were not for Jan."

"That's good," returned Jan. "What do I do?"

"You worry me," she answered curtly. "You say I must not go out; I must not do this, or do the other. You know you do. Presently you will be saying I must not dance. But I *will* dance."

"Does Lionel know you have come?" inquired Jan, leaving other questions in abeyance.

"I don't know. It's nothing to him. He was not going to stop *me*. You should pay attention to your own appearance, Jan, instead of to mine; look at your gloves!"

"They split as I was drawing them on," said Jan.

Sibylla turned from him with a gesture of contempt. "I am enchanted that you have come home, Sir Edmund," she said to the baronet.

"I am pleased myself, Mrs. Verner. Home has more charms for me than the world knows of."

"You will give us some nice entertainments, I hope," she continued, her cough beginning to subside. "Sir Rufus lived like a hermit."

That she would not live to partake of any entertainments he might give, Sir Edmund Hautley felt as sure as though he had then seen her in her shroud. No, not even could he be deceived, or entertain the faintest false hope, though the cough became stilled, and the hectic of reaction shone on her cheeks. Very

beautiful would she then have looked, but for her attenuate frame, with her bright flush and her golden hair.

Quite sufficiently beautiful to attract partners, and one came up and requested her to dance. She rose in acquiescence, turning her back upon Jan, who would have interposed.

"Go away," said she. "I don't want any lecturing from you."

But Jan did not go away. He laid his hand impressively upon her shoulder. "You *must not* do it, Sibylla. There's a pond outside: you might just as well go and throw yourself into that. It would do you no more harm."

She jerked away from him; laughing a little scornful laugh, and saying a few contemptuous words to her partner, directed to Jan. Jan stood with his back against the wall, and watched her, giving her a few words in his turn.

"As good try to turn a mule, as turn *her*."

He watched her through the quadrille. He watched her gradually increasing excitement. Nothing could be more pernicious for her; nothing more dangerous; as Jan knew. Presently he watched her plunge into a waltz: and just at that moment his eyes fell on Lionel.

He had just entered; he was shaking hands with Sir Edmund Hautley. Jan made his way to them.

"Have you seen Sibylla, Jan?" was the first question of Lionel to his brother. "I hear she has come."

For answer, Jan pointed towards a couple amidst the waltzers, and Lionel's dismayed gaze fell on his wife. She was whirling round, her eyes glistening, her bosom heaving. With the violence of the exertion, her poor breath seemed to shake her to pieces, and the dew poured from her heated brow.

One dismayed exclamation, and Lionel took a step forward. Jan caught him back.

"It is of no use, Lionel. I have tried. It would only make a scene, and produce no good. I am not sure, either, whether opposition at the present moment would not do as much harm as is being done."

"Jan!" cried Sir Edmund, in an undertone, "is—she—dying?"

"She is not far off it," was Jan's answer.

Lionel had yielded to Jan's remonstrance, and stood back against the wall, as Jan had previously stood. The waltz came to an end. In the dispersion Lionel lost sight of his wife. A few moments, and strange sounds of confusion were echoing from an adjoining room. Jan went away at his usual rate, Lionel in his wake. They had caught the reiterated words, spoken in every phase of alarm, "Mrs. Verner! Mrs. Verner!"

Ah, poor Mrs. Verner! That had been her last dance on earth. The terrible exertion had induced a fit of coughing of unnatural violence; and, in the straining, a blood-vessel had once more broken.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE LAMP BURNT OUT AT LAST.

FROM the roof of the house to the floor of the cellar, ominous silence reigned in Deerham Court. Mrs. Verner lay in it—dying. She had been conveyed home from the Hall on the morning following the catastrophe. Miss Hautley and Sir Edmund urged her remaining longer, offering every possible hospitality; but poor Sibylla seemed to have taken a caprice against it. Caprices she would have, up to her last breath. All her words were "Home! home!" Jan said she might be moved with safety; and she was taken there.

She seemed none the worse for the removal—she was none the worse for it. She was dying, but the transit had not increased her danger or her pain. Dr. Hayes had been over in the course of the night, and was now expected again.

"It's all waste of time, his coming; he can't do anything; but it is a satisfaction for Lionel," observed Jan to his mother.

She lay on the sofa in her dressing-room, propped up by pillows; her face wan, her breathing laboured. Decima was with her, calm and still; Catherine hovered near, to be useful, if necessary; Lady Verner was in her room within call; Lucy Tempest sat on the stairs. Lucy, remembering certain curious explosions, feared that her presence might not be acceptable to the invalid; but Lucy partook of the general restlessness, and sat down in her simple fashion on the stairs, listening for news from the sick-chamber. Neither she nor any one else in the house could have divested themselves of excitement that day, or settled to calmness in the remotest degree. Lucy wished from her very heart that she could do something to alleviate the sufferings of Mrs. Verner, or to soothe the general discomfort.

By-and-by, Jan entered, and came straight up the stairs. "Am I to walk over you, Miss Lucy?"

"There's plenty of room to pass me, Jan," she answered, pulling her dress aside.

"Are you doing penance?" he asked, as he strode past her.

"It is so dull, remaining in the drawing-room by myself," answered Lucy, apologetically. "Every one is upstairs."

Jan went in to the sick-room, and Lucy sat on, in silence; her head bent down, as before. Presently Jan returned.

"Is she any better, Jan?"

"She's no worse," was Jan's answer. "That's something, when it comes to this stage. Where's Lionel?"

"I don't know," replied Lucy. "I think he went out. Jan," she added, dropping her voice, "will she get well?"

"Get well!" echoed Jan in his plainness. "It's not likely. She won't be here four-and-twenty hours longer."

"Oh, Jan! if I could only save her!" murmured Lucy, in her unselfish sympathy. "I shall always be thinking that perhaps if I had spoken to her last night, instead of going out to find Mr. Verner, she might not have gone."

"Look here," said Jan. "You are not an angel yet, are you, Miss Lucy?"

"Not at all like one, I fear, Jan," was her sad answer.

"Well, then, I can tell you for your satisfaction that an angel from heaven wouldn't have stopped her last night. She would have gone in spite of it—in spite of you all. Her mind was made up to it; and her telling Lionel in the morning that she'd give up going, provided he would promise to take her for a day's pleasure to Heartbury, was only a ruse to throw the house off its guard."

Jan passed down. Lucy sat on. As Jan was crossing the court-yard,—for he actually went out at the front door for once in his life, as he had done the day he carried the blanket and the tea-kettle,—he encountered John Massingbird. Mr. John wore his usual free-and-easy costume and had his short pipe in his mouth.

"I say," began he, "what's this tale about Mrs. Lionel? Folks are saying that she went off to Hautley's last night, and danced herself to death."

"That's near enough," replied Jan. "She would go; and she did go; and she danced; and she finished up by breaking a blood-vessel. And now she is dying."

"What was Lionel about, to let her go?"

"Lionel knew nothing of it. She slipped off whilst he was out. Nobody was in the house but Lucy Tempest and one or two of the servants. She dressed herself on the quiet, sent for a fly, and went."

"And danced!"

"And danced," assented Jan. "Her shoulders looked like a bag of bones. You might almost have heard them rattle."

"I always said there were moments when Sibylla's mind was not right," composedly observed John Massingbird. "Is there any hope?"

"None. There has not been any hope, in point of fact, for a long while," continued Jan. "As any one might have seen, except Sibylla. She has been obstinately blind to it. Although her father warned her, when he was here, that she could not live."

John Massingbird smoked for some moments in silence. "She was always sickly," he presently said. "Sickly in constitution; sickly in temper."

John Massingbird went out, and Lionel came in, and passed upstairs with a heavy footstep. Lucy started from her place, but not before he had seen her.

"Why do you sit there, Lucy?"

"I don't know," she answered, blushing that *he* should have caught her there, though she had not cared for Jan's doing so. "It is lonely downstairs to-day: here I can ask every one who comes out of the room how she is. I wish I could cure her! I wish I could do anything for her!"

He laid his hand lightly on her head as he passed. "Thank you for all, my dear child!" And there was a strange tone of pain in his voice as he spoke it.

Only Decima was in the room then, and she left it as Lionel entered. Treading softly across the carpet, he sat down in a chair opposite Sibylla's couch. She slept—for a great wonder—or appeared to sleep. The whole morning long—nay, the whole night long, her bright, restless eyes had been wide open: sleep as far from her as it could well be. It had seemed that her fractious temper kept sleep away. But her eyes were closed now, and purple rims enclosed them, terribly dark on the wan white face. Suddenly the eyes unclosed with a start, as if her doze had been abruptly disturbed, though Lionel had been perfectly still. She looked at him for a minute or two in silence, and he, knowing it would be well that she should doze again, neither spoke nor moved.

"Lionel, am I dying?"

Quietly as the words were spoken, they struck on his ear with startling intensity. He rose then and pushed her hair from her damp brow with a gentle hand, murmuring some general inquiry as to how she felt.

"Am I dying?" came again from the panting lips.

What was he to answer her? To say that she was dying, might send her into a paroxysm of terror; to deceive her in that awful hour by telling her she was not, went against every feeling of his heart.

"But I don't want to die," she urged, in some excitement, interpreting his silence to mean the worst. "Can't Jan do anything for me? Can't Dr. Hayes?"

"Dr. Hayes will be here soon," observed Lionel, soothingly, if somewhat evasively. "He will come by the next train."

She took his hand, held it between hers, and looked beseechingly up to his face. "I don't want to leave you," she whispered. "Oh, Lionel! keep me here if you can! You know you are always kind

to me. Sometimes I have reproached you that you were not so, but it was not true. You have been ever kind, have you not?"

"I have ever striven to be so," he answered, tears glistening on his eyelashes.

"I don't want to die. I want to get well and go about again, as I used to do when at Verner's Pride. Now Sir Edmund Hautley has come home, that will be a pleasant place to visit at. Lionel, I don't want to die! *Can't* you keep me in life?"

"If by sacrificing my own life, I could save yours, Heaven knows how willingly I would do it," he answered.

"Why should I die? Why should I die, more than others? I don't think I am dying, Lionel," she added, after a pause. "I shall get well yet."

She stretched out her hand for some cooling drink, and Lionel gave it to her. But she jerked her head away before it had scarcely touched her lips.

"It's not nice," she said. So he put it down.

"I want to see Deborah," she resumed.

"My dear, they are at Heartbury. I told you so this morning. They will be home no doubt by the next train. Jan has sent for them."

"What should they do at Heartbury?" she asked fractiously.

"They went over yesterday to remain until to-day, I hear."

Subsiding into silence, she lay quite still, save for her panting breath, holding Lionel's hand as he bent over her. Some noise in the corridor outside attracted her attention, and she signed to him to open the door.

"Perhaps it is Dr. Hayes," she murmured. "He is better than Jan."

Better than Jan, insomuch as that he was rather given to assure his patients they would soon be strong enough to enjoy the delights of a gipsy party, even though he knew that they had not an hour's life left in them. Not so Jan. Never did a more cheering doctor enter a sick-room than Jan, so long as there was the faintest shadow of hope. But, when the closing scene was actually come, the spirit all but on the wing, then Jan whispered of hope no more. He could not do it in his sincerity. Jan could be silent; but Jan could not tell a man, whose soul was hovering on the threshold of the next world, that he might yet recreate himself dancing hornpipes in this. Dr. Hayes would; it was in his creed to do so; and in that respect Dr. Hayes was different from Jan.

It was not Dr. Hayes. As Lionel opened the door, Lucy was passing, and Thérèse was at the end of the corridor talking to Lady Verner. Lucy stopped to inquire, her tones low, how the invalid then was.

"Whose voice is that?" called out Mrs. Verner, her words scarcely reaching her husband's ears.

"It is Lucy Tempest's," he said, closing the door, and returning to her. "She was asking after you."

"Tell her to come in."

Lionel opened the door again, and beckoned to Lucy. "Mrs. Verner is asking if you will come in and see her," he said, as she approached.

All the old grievances, the insults of Sibylla, blotted out from her gentle and forgiving mind, lost sight of in this great crisis, Lucy went up to the couch and stood by Sibylla's side. Lionel stood near.

"I trust you are not feeling very ill, Mrs. Verner," she said in a low, sweet tone, as she bent towards her and touched her hand. Touched it only; as if she did not feel sufficiently sure of Sibylla's humour to presume to take it.

"No, I don't think I'm better. I am so weak here."

She touched her chest as she spoke. Lucy, perhaps somewhat at a loss what to say, stood in silence.

"I have been very cross to you sometimes, Lucy," she resumed. "I meant nothing. I used to feel vexed with every one, and said foolish things without meaning it. It was so cruel to be turned from Verner's Pride, and it made me unhappy."

"Indeed, I do not think anything about it," replied Lucy, tears rising to her eyes in her forgiving tenderness. "I know how ill you must have felt. I used to feel that I should like to help you to bear the pain and the sorrow."

Sibylla lay panting. Lucy remained as she was; Lionel also. Presently she, Sibylla, glanced at Lucy.

"I wish you'd kiss me."

Lucy, unnerved by the words, bent closer to her, a shower of tears falling from her eyes on to Sibylla's face.

"If I could only save her life for you!" she murmured to Lionel, glancing up at him through her tears as she rose from the embrace. And she saw that Lionel's eyes were wet as her own.

And now there was commotion outside. Sounds, as of talking and wailing were heard. Little need to tell Lionel that they came from the Miss Wests: he recognized their voices; and Lucy glided forward to open the door.

Lionel hastened out to them, a warning upon his tongue. He detained them as they were hastening in.

"Be still, for her sake."

Deborah looked at his pale face, reading it aright. "Is she so ill as *that?*" she gasped. "Is there no hope?"

He only shook his head. "Whatever you do, preserve a calm demeanour before her. We must keep her tranquil."

"Master Cheese says she went to the ball—and danced," said Deborah. "Mr. Verner, how could you allow it?"

"She did go," he answered. "It was no fault of mine."

Heavier footsteps upon the stairs now. They were those of the physician, who had come by the train which had brought the Miss Wests. He, Dr. Hayes, entered the room, and they stole in after him; Lionel followed; Jan came in, and made another; and Lucy remained outside.

Lady Verner saw Dr. Hayes when he was going away.

"There was no change," he said, in answer to her inquiries. "Mrs. Verner was certainly in a very weak state, and—there was no change."

The Miss Wests removed their travelling garments, and took up their stations in the sick-room—not to leave it again until life should have departed from Sibylla. Lionel remained in it. Decima and Catherine went in and out, and Jan made frequent visits to the house.

"Tell papa it is leaving Verner's Pride that has killed me," said Sibylla to Amilly with nearly her latest breath.

There was no bed for any of them that night, any more than there had been the previous one. A life was hovering in the balance. Lucy sat with Lady Verner, and the rest went in to them occasionally, taking news. Dawn was breaking when one went in for the last time.

It was Jan. He had come to break the tidings to his mother, and he sat himself down on the arm of the sofa—Jan fashion—while he did it.

Life's flickering lamp had burnt out at last.

CHAPTER LXIX.

ACHING HEARTS.

If there be one day in the whole year more gladdening to the heart than all others, it is surely the first day of early spring. It may come and give us a glimpse almost in mid-winter; it may not come until winter ought to have been long past; but, appear when it will, it brings rejoicing with it. How many a heart, sinking under its burthen of care, is reawakened to hope by that first bright day of spring! It seems to promise that there shall yet be a change in the dreary lot; it whispers that trouble may not last; that sickness may be superseded by health; that this dark wintry world will be followed by heaven.

Such a day was smiling over Deerham. And they were only in

the first days of February. The sun was warm, the fields were green, the sky was blue: all Nature seemed to have put on her best and brightest. As Mrs. Duff stood at her door and exchanged greetings with sundry gossips passing by—an unusual number of whom were abroad—she gave it as her opinion that the charming weather had been vouchsafed as a special favour to Miss Decima Verner; for it was the wedding-day of that young lady and Sir Edmund Hautley.

Sir Edmund would fain have been married immediately after his return. Perhaps Decima would also. But Lady Verner, always given to study the proprieties of life, considered that it would be more seemly to allow a few months to roll on after the death of her son's wife. So the autumn and part of the winter were allowed to go by; and in this, the first week of February, they were united; favoured with weather that might have cheated them into a belief that it was May-day.

How anxious Deerham was for a sight of her, as the carriages conveying the party to church drove to and fro! Lionel gave her away, and her bridemaids were Lady Mary Elmsley and Lucy Tempest. The story of the long engagement between her and Edmund Hautley had electrified Deerham; and some began to wish that they had not called her an old maid quite so prematurely. Should it unfortunately have reached her ears, it might tend to place them in the black books of the future Lady Hautley. Lady Verner was rather against Jan's going to church. Lady Verner's private opinion was—indeed, it may be said her proclaimed opinion as well as her private one—that Jan would be no ornament to a wedding-party. But Decima had already obtained Jan's promise to be present: a promise Jan had given conditionally—that no patients required him at the time. But Jan's patients proved considerate that day; and Jan appeared not only at church, but at the breakfast.

At dinner also, in the evening. Sir Edmund and Lady Hautley had left then; but those who remained of course wanted dinner; and had it. It was a small party, more sociable than formal. Mr. and Mrs. Bitterworth, Lord Garle and his sister, Miss Hautley, and John Massingbird. Miss Hautley was again staying temporarily at Deerham Hall, but she would leave it on the following day. John Massingbird was invited at the special request of Lionel. Perhaps John was less of an ornament to a social party than even Jan, but Lionel had been anxious that no slight should be placed upon him. It would have been a slight for the owner of Verner's Pride to be left out at Decima Verner's wedding. Lady Verner held out a little; she did not like John Massingbird; never had liked any of the Massingbirds; but Lionel carried his point. John

Massingbird showed himself presentable that day, and had left his pipe at home.

In one point Mr. Massingbird proved himself as little given to ceremony as Jan could be. The dinner-hour, he had been told, was seven o'clock; and he arrived shortly after six. Lucy Tempest and Mary Elmsley were in the drawing-room. Fair, graceful girls both of them, in their floating white bridemaids' robes, which they would wear for the day: Lucy always serene and quiet; Mary, merry-hearted and gay. Mary was to stay with them for some days. They looked somewhat scared at the early entrance of John Massingbird. Curious tales had gone about Deerham of John's wild habits at Verner's Pride, and it may be that they felt half afraid of him. Lucy whispered to the servant to find Mr. Verner and tell him. Lady Verner had gone to her room to make ready for dinner.

"I say, young ladies, is it at six or seven o'clock that we are to dine?" he began. "I could not remember."

"Seven," replied Lucy.

"I am too soon by an hour, then," returned he, sitting down before the fire. "How are you by this time, Lionel?"

Lionel shook hands with him as he came in. "Never mind; we are glad to see you," he said, in answer to a half-apology from John Massingbird about arriving early. "I can show you those calculations now, if you like."

"Calculations be hanged!" returned John. "When a fellow comes out to dinner, he does not want to be met with 'calculations.' What else, Lionel?"

Lionel Verner laughed. They were certain calculations drawn out by himself, connected with work to be commenced on the Verner's Pride estate. For the last month he had been vainly seeking an opportunity of going over them with John Massingbird: that gentleman, who hated details as much as Master Cheese hated work, continually contrived to put it off.

"Have you given yourself the pleasure of making them out in duplicate, that you propose to show them here?" asked he, some irony in his tone. "I thought they were in the study at Verner's Pride. You can't think what a conscientious steward he is, or how he plagues me with business details, Miss Tempest."

"I can," said Lady Mary, freely. "I think he is terribly conscientious."

"All the more so, that he is not going to be a steward very long," answered Lionel, in a tone through which ran a serious meaning, light as it was. "The time is approaching when I shall render up an account of my stewardship, so far as Verner's Pride is concerned."

"What do you mean by that?" cried John Massingbird.

"I'll tell you to-morrow," answered Lionel.

"I'd like to know now, if it's all the same to you, sir," was John's answer. "You are not going to give up the management of Verner's Pride."

"Yes, I am," replied Lionel. "I should have resigned it when my wife died, but that—that—Decima wished me to remain in Deerham until her marriage," he concluded, after some perceptible hesitation.

"What has Deerham done to you, that you want to quit it?" asked John Massingbird.

"I should have left Deerham years ago, had it been practicable," was the remark of Lionel.

"I ask you, why?"

"Why? Do you think Deerham and its reminiscences can be so pleasant to me, that I should care to stop in it, unless compelled to do so?"

"Bother reminiscences!" rejoined Mr. Massingbird. "I conclude you allude to the ups and downs you have had in regard to Verner's Pride. *That's* not the cause, Lionel Verner—if you do want to go away. You have had time to get over that. Perhaps some lady is in the way? Some cross-grained disappointment in that line? Have you been refusing to marry him, Lady Mary?"

Lady Mary threw her laughing blue eyes full in the face of the questioner. "He never asked me, Mr. Massingbird."

"No!" said John.

"No," said she, the lips laughing now, as well as the eyes. "In the old days—I declare I don't mind letting out the secret—in the old days, before he was married at all, mamma and Lady Verner contrived to let me know by indirect hints, that Lionel Verner might be expected to—to—solicit the honour of my becoming his wife. How I laughed behind their backs! It would have been time enough to turn rebellious when the offer came—which I was quite sure never would come—to make them a low curtsey, and say, 'You are very kind, but I must decline the honour.' Did you get any teasings on your side, Lionel?" asked she frankly.

A half-smile flitted over Lionel's lips. He did not speak.

"No," added Lady Mary, becoming serious, her blue eyes earnest; "I and Lionel have ever been good friends, fond of each other, I believe, in a sober kind of way: but—any closer relationship, we should both have run away from, as wide as the poles. I can answer for myself: and I think I can for him."

"I see," said John Massingbird. "To be husband and wife would go against the grain: you'd rather be brother and sister."

What there could be in the remark to disturb the equanimity

of Mary Elmsley, she best knew. Certain it was, that her face turned scarlet, and it seemed that she did not know where to look. She spoke rapidly, as if to cover her confusion.

"So you perceive, Mr. Massingbird, that *I* have nothing to do with Mr. Verner's plans and projects; with his remaining at Deerham or his going away from it. I should not think any lady has. You are not going, are you?" she asked, turning to Lionel.

"Yes, I shall go, Mary," he answered. "As soon as Mr. Massingbird can find some one to replace me——"

"Mr. Massingbird's not going to find any one to replace you," cried John. "I declare, Lionel, if you do go, I'll take on Roy, just to spite you and your old tenants. By-the-way, though, talking of Roy, who do you think has come back to Deerham?" he broke off rather less vehemently.

"How can I guess?" asked Lionel. "Some of the Mormons, perhaps."

"No. Luke Roy. He arrived this afternoon. I have not seen him, but I met Mrs. Roy as I came on here, and she told me. She was hurrying along with some muffins in her hand—to regale him, I suppose."

"How glad she must be!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Rather sorry, I thought," returned John. "She looked very quaky and shivery. I tell you what, Lionel," he continued, turning to him, "dinner will not be ready this three-quarters of an hour yet. I'll just go as far as old Roy's, and have a word with Luke. I've a top-coat in the hall."

He went out without ceremony. Lionel walked with him to the door. It was a fine starlight evening. When he, Lionel, returned, Lucy was alone, and had gone to her favourite place, the low stool on the hearthrug. She was more kneeling than sitting. The firelight played on her sweet face, so young and girlish still in its outlines, on her pretty hands clasped on her knees, on the pearls which rested on her neck. Lionel stood on the other side of the hearthrug, leaning as usual on the mantel-piece.

At least five minutes passed in silence. And then Lucy raised her eyes to his.

"Was it a joke, what you said to John Massingbird—about leaving Deerham?"

"It was sober earnest, Lucy. I should have left, as you heard me say, after Mrs. Verner's death, but for one or two considerations. Decima very much wished me to remain until her marriage; and—I did not see my way particularly clear to embark in a new course of life. I do not see it yet."

"Why should you go?" asked Lucy.

"Because I—because it is expedient that I should go, for many reasons," he answered.

"You do not like to remain under John Massingbird?"

"It is not that. I have got over that. My prospects have been so utterly blighted, Lucy, that I think some of the old pride of the Verner's has gone out of me. I do not see a chance of getting anything half as good as this stewardship—as he just now called it—under John Massingbird. But I shall try at it."

"What shall you try, do you think?"

"I cannot tell. I should like to get something abroad; I should like to go to India. I do not suppose I have any real chance of getting an appointment there; but remaining in Deerham will certainly not bring it to me. That, or anything else."

Lucy's lips had parted. "You will not think of going to India now!" she breathlessly exclaimed.

"Indeed I do think of it, Lucy."

"So far off as that!"

The words were uttered with a sound of pain. Lionel passed his hand over his brow, the action betokening pain quite as great as Lucy's tone implied. Lucy rose from her seat and stood near him, her thoughtful face upturned.

"What is left to me in England?" he resumed. "What am I here? A man without home, fortune, hope. I have worse than no prospects. The ceremony at which we have been assisting to-day seems to have brought these facts more palpably before me in all their naked truth. Other men have a home, can form social ties to bless it. I cannot."

"But why?" asked Lucy, her lips trembling.

"*Why!* Can you ask it, Lucy? There are moments—and they are all too frequent—when a vision comes over me of what my future might be; of the new ties I might form and find the happiness in, that—that I did not find in the last. The vision, I say, comes all too frequently for my peace of mind, when I remember the fact that it can never be realized."

Lucy stood, her hands tightly clasped before her, a world of sadness in her fair young face. One less single-hearted, less *true* than Lucy Tempest, might have professed to ignore the drift of his words. Had Lucy, since Mrs. Verner's death, cast a thought to the possibility of certain happy relations arising between herself and Lionel—those social ties he now spoke of? No, not intentionally. If any such dreams lurked in her heart unbidden, there she had let them lie, in entire abeyance. Lionel Verner had never spoken a word to her, or dropped a hint that he contemplated them: his intercourse with her had been free and open, just as it was with Decima. She was quite content: to be with him, to see him daily, was happiness enough for her, without looking to the future.

"The farther I get from England the better," he resumed. "India, from old associations, naturally suggests itself, but I care not whither I go. You threw out a suggestion once, Lucy, that Colonel Tempest might be able to help me to something there, by which I may get a living. Should I have found no success in London by the time he arrives, it is my intention to ask him the favour. He will be home in a few weeks now."

"And you talk of leaving Deerham immediately!" cried Lucy. "Where's the necessity? You should wait until he comes."

"I have waited too long, as it is. Deerham will be glad to be rid of me. It may hold a jubilee the day it hears I have shipped myself off for India. I wonder if I shall ever come back again? Probably not. I and old friends may never meet again on this side heaven."

He had affected to speak lightly, jokingly, toying at the same time with some trifle on the mantel-piece. But as he turned his eyes on Lucy at the conclusion of his sentence, he saw that the tears were falling on her cheeks. The words, the ideas they conjured up, had jarred painfully on every fibre of her heart. Lionel's light mood went out of him.

"Lucy," he whispered, bending to her, his tone changing to one of passionate earnestness, "I dare not stay here longer. There are moments when I am tempted to forget my position, to forget honour, and speak words that—that—I ought not to speak. Even now, as I look down upon you, my heart is throbbing, my veins are tingling; but I must not touch you with my finger, I must not whisper to you of my impassioned love. All I can do is to carry it away with me, and battle with it alone."

Her face had grown white with emotion. She raised her wet eyes yearningly to his; but she still spoke the simple truth, unvarnished, the great agony that was lying at her heart.

"How shall I live on, with you away? It will be more lonely than I can bear."

"Don't, child!" he said in a tone of entreaty. "The temptation from my own heart is all too present with me. Don't *you* tempt me. Strong man though I am, there are things that I cannot bear."

He leaned on the mantel-piece, shading his face with his hand. Lucy stood in silence, striving to suppress her emotion.

"In the old days—very long ago, they seem now, to look back upon—I had the opportunity of assuring my life's happiness," he continued in low, steady tones. "I did not do it; I let it slip from me, foolishly, wilfully; of my own free act. But, Lucy—believe me or not as you like—I loved the one I rejected, more than the one I took. Before the sound of my marriage bells had rung out on my ears, the terrible conviction was within me that I loved that other

one more than all created things. You may judge, then, what my punishment has been."

She raised her eyes to his face, but he did not see them, did not look at her. He continued:

"It was the one great mistake of my life: made by myself alone. I cannot plead the excuse which so many are able to plead for life's mistakes—that I was drawn into it. I made it deliberately, as may be said; of my own will. It is only just, therefore, that I should expiate it. How I have suffered in the expiation, Heaven alone knows. It is true that I bound myself in a moment of delirium, of passion; giving myself no time for thought: but I have never looked upon that fact as an excuse; for a man who has come to the years I had, should hold his feelings under his own control. Yes; I missed that opportunity, and the chance went by for life."

"For life?" repeated Lucy, with streaming eyes. It was too terribly real a moment for any attempt at concealment. A little reticence, in her maiden modesty; but of concealment, none.

"I am a poor man now, Lucy," he explained; "worse than without prospects, if you knew all. And I do not know why you should not know all," he added, after a pause. "I am in debt. Such a man cannot marry."

The words were spoken quietly, temperately; their tone proving how hopeless could be any appeal against them, whether from him, from her, or from without. It was perfectly true: Lionel Verner's position placed him beyond the reach of social ties.

Little more was said. It was a topic Lucy could not urge or gainsay; and Lionel did not see fit to continue it: he may have felt that it was dangerous ground, even for the man of honour that he strove to be. He held out his hand to Lucy.

"Will you forgive me?" he softly whispered.

Her sobs choked her. She strove to speak, as she crept closer to him, and put out her hands in answer; but the words would not come. She lifted her face to glance at his.

"Not a night passes but I pray God to forgive me," he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion, as he pressed her hands between his own, "to forgive the sorrow I have brought upon you. Oh, Lucy! forgive—forgive me!"

Her sobs impeded her utterance; her tears blinded her. Lionel kept the hands strained to him; he looked down on the upturned face, and read its love there; he kept his own bent, with its mingled expression of tenderness and pain: but he did not take from hers a single caress. What right had he? Verily, if he had not shown control over himself once in his life, he was showing it now.

He released one of his hands and laid it gently upon her head for a minute, his lips moving silently. Then he let her go. It was over

She sat down on the low stool again on the opposite side of the hearth, and buried her face and her anguish. Lionel buried *his* face, his elbow on the mantel-piece, his hand uplifted: he never looked at her again, or spoke; she never raised her head; and when the company began to arrive, and came in, the silence was still unbroken.

And, as they talked and laughed that night, fulfilling the usages of society amidst the guests, how little did any one present suspect the scene which had taken place but a short time before! How many of the smiling faces we meet in society cover aching hearts!

CHAPTER LXX.

MASTER CHEESE BLOWN UP.

THERE were other houses in Deerham, that night, not quite so full of sociability as was Lady Verner's. For one, may be instanced that of the Miss Wests. They sat at the table in the general sitting-room, hard at work, a lamp between them, for the gas-burners above were high for sewing, and their eyes were no longer as keen as they had been. Miss Deborah was "turning" a table-cloth; Miss Amilly was darning sundry holes in a pillow-case. Their stock of household linen was in great need of being replaced by new; but, not having the money to spare, they were doing their best to renovate the old.

A slight—they could not help feeling it as such—had been put upon them that day, in not having been invited to Decima Verner's wedding. The sisters-in-law of Lionel Verner, connected closely with Jan, they had expected the invitation. But it had not come. Lionel had pressed his mother to give it; Jan, in his straight-forward way, when he had found it was not forthcoming, said, "Why don't you invite them? They'd do nobody any harm." Lady Verner, however, had positively declined: the Wests had never been acquaintances of hers, she said. They felt the slight, poor ladies. But they felt it quite humbly and meekly; without complaining; not venturing even to say to each other that they *might* have been asked. They only sat a little more silent than usual over their work that evening, doing more, and talking less.

The servant came in with the supper-tray, and laid it on the table. "Is the cold pork to come in?" asked she. "I have not brought it. I thought, perhaps, you'd not care to have it in to-night, ma'am, as Mr. Jan's out."

Miss Deborah cast her eyes on the tray. There was a handsome piece of cheese, and a large glass of fresh celery. A rapid calcula-

tion passed through her mind that the cold pork, if not cut for supper, would make a dinner the following day, with an apple or jam pudding.

"No, Martha, this will do for to-night," she answered. "Call Master Cheese, and then draw the ale."

"It's a wonder *he* waits to be called," was Martha's comment, as she went out. "He is generally in before the tray, whatever the meal may be."

She went out at the side door, and entered the surgery. No one was in it except the surgery-boy. The boy was asleep, with his head and arms on the counter, and the gas flaring away over him. A hissing and fizzing from Jan's room, similar to the sounds Lucy Tempest heard when she invaded the surgery the night of the ball at Deerham Hall, saluted Martha's ears. She went round the counter, tried the door, found it fastened, and shook the handle.

"Who's there?" called out Master Cheese from the other side.

"It's me," said Martha. "Supper's ready."

"Very well. I'll be in directly," responded Master Cheese.

"I say!" called out Martha wrathfully, rattling the handle again, "if you are making a mess of that room, as you do sometimes, I won't have it. I'll complain to Mr. Jan. There! It would take two servants to clear up after you."

"You go to Bath," was the satisfactory advice of Master Cheese.

Martha called out another wrathful warning, and withdrew. Master Cheese came forth, locked the door, took out the key, went indoors, and sat down to supper.

Sat down in angry consternation. He threw his eager glances to every point of the table, and could not see upon it what he was longing to see—what he had been expecting all the evening—for the terrible event of its not being there had never so much as crossed his imagination. Dinner had consisted of a loin of pork with the crackling on, and apple-sauce. A dish so beloved by Master Cheese, that he never thought of it without a watering of the mouth. It had been nothing like half eaten at dinner. Jan was at the wedding-breakfast, and the Miss Wests, in Master Cheese's estimation, ate like two sparrows: of course he had expected to be regaled with it at supper. Miss West cut him a large piece of cheese, and Miss Amilly handed him the glass of celery.

Now Master Cheese had no great liking for that vulgar edible which bore his name, and which used to form the staple of so many good old-fashioned suppers. To cheese, in the abstract, he could certainly have had no forcible objection, since he was wont to steal into the larder, between breakfast and dinner, and help himself—as Martha would grumblingly complain—to "pounds" of it. The

state of the case was just this: the young gentleman liked cheese well enough when he could get nothing better. Cheese, however, as a substitute for cold loin of pork, with "crackling" and apple-sauce, was hardly to be borne, and Master Cheese sat in dumb-foundered dismay, heaving great sighs and casting his eyes upon his plate.

"I feel quite faint," said he.

"What makes you feel faint?" asked Miss Deb.

"Well, I suppose it is for want of my supper," he returned. "Is—is there no meat to-night, Miss Deb?"

"Not any," she answered decisively. She had the pleasure of knowing Master Cheese well.

Master Cheese paused. "There was nearly the whole joint left at dinner," said he in a tone of remonstrance.

"There was a good deal of it left, and that's the reason it's not coming in," replied Miss Deb. "It will be sufficient for to-morrow's dinner with a pudding. I'm sure it will not hurt you to have cheese for supper for one night."

With all his propensity for *bonne chère*, Master Cheese was really of a modest nature, and would not go the length of demanding luxuries, if denied them by Miss Deb. He was fain to content himself with the cheese and celery, eating so much of it that it may be a question whether withholding the cold pork had been a gain in point of economy.

Laying down his knife at length, he put back his chair to return to the surgery. Generally he was not in so much haste; he liked to wait until the things were removed, even to the cloth, lest by a speedy departure he might miss some nice little dainty or other, coming in at the end of the repast. It is true such impromptu arrivals were not common at Miss West's table, but Master Cheese liked to be on the sure side.

"You are in a hurry," remarked Miss Amilly, surprised at the unwonted withdrawal.

"Jan's out," returned Master Cheese. "Folks may be coming in to the surgery."

"I wonder if Mr. Jan will be late to-night?" cried Miss Deb.

"Of course he will," confidently replied Master Cheese. "Who ever heard of a wedding-party breaking up before morning?"

For this reason, probably, Master Cheese returned to the surgery, prepared to "make a night of it." Not altogether in the general acceptation of that term, but at his chemical experiments. It was most rare that he could make sure of Jan's absence for any length of time. When abroad in pursuance of his professional duties, Jan might be returning at any period; in five minutes or in five hours. There was no knowing; and Master Cheese dared not get his

chemical apparatus about, in the uncertainty, Jan having so positively forbidden his recreations in the science. For this night, however, he thought he was safe. Master Cheese's ideas of a wedding festival consisted of unlimited feasting. *He* could not have left such a board, if bidden to one, until morning light, and he judged others by himself.

Jan's bedroom was strewed with vessels of various sorts and sizes from one end of it to the other. In the old days, Dr. West had been a considerable dabbler in experimental chemistry himself. Jan also understood something of it. Master Cheese did not see why he should not learn. A roaring fire burnt in Jan's grate, and the young gentleman stood before it for a few minutes, previous to resuming his researches, giving his back a roast, and indulging bitter reminiscences touching his deficient supper.

"She's getting downright mean, is that old Deb!" grumbled he. "Especially if Jan happens to be out. Wasn't it different in West's time! He knew what was good. Catch her daring to put bread-and-cheese on the table for supper then. I shall be quite exhausted before the night's over.—Bob!"

Bob, his head still on the counter, partially woke up at the call. Sufficiently so to return a sound by way of response.

"Bob!" roared Master Cheese again. "Can't you hear?"

Bob, his eyes blinking and winking, came in, in answer. That is, as far as he could get in, for the litter lying about.

"Bring in the jar of tamarinds."

"The jar of tamarinds?" repeated Bob. "In here?"

"Yes, in here," said Master Cheese. "Now, you needn't stare. All you have to do is to obey orders."

Bob disappeared, and presently returned, lugging in a big porcelain jar. He was ordered "to take out the bung, and leave it open." He did so, setting it on the floor, near Master Cheese, and giving his opinion gratuitously of the condition of the room. "Won't there be a row when Mr. Jan comes in and finds it like this!"

"The things will be put away long before he comes," responded Master Cheese. "Mind your own business. And, look here! if anybody comes bothering, Mr. Jan's out, and Mr. Cheese is out, and they can't be seen till morning. Unless it's some desperate case," added Master Cheese, somewhat qualifying the instructions. "A fellow dying, or anything of that sort."

Bob withdrew, to fall asleep in the surgery as before, his head and arms on the counter; and Master Cheese recommenced his studies. Solacing himself first of all with a few mouthfuls of tamarinds, as he intended to do at intervals throughout his labours, he plunged his hands into a mass of incongruous substances—nitre, chlorate of potass, and sulphur being amongst them.

The Miss Wests, meanwhile, had resumed their work after supper, and sewed on until the clock struck ten. Then they put it away, and drew round the fire for a chat, their feet on the fender. A very short time, and they were surprised by the entrance of Jan.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Miss Amilly. "It's never you yet, Mr. Jan!"

"Why shouldn't it be?" returned Jan, drawing forward a chair, and sitting down by them. "Did you fancy I should stop and sleep there?"

"Master Cheese thought you would keep it up until morning."

"Oh! did he? Is he gone to bed?"

"He is in the surgery," replied Miss Amilly. "Mr. Jan, you have told us nothing yet about the wedding in the morning."

"It went off," answered Jan.

"But the details? How did the ladies look?"

"They looked as usual, for all I saw," replied Jan.

"What did they wear?"

"Wear! Gowns, I suppose."

"Oh, Mr. Jan! Surely you saw better than that! Can't you tell what sort of gowns?"

Jan really could not. It may be questioned whether he could have told a petticoat from a gown. Miss Amilly was waiting with breathless interest, her lips apart.

"Some were in white, and some were in colours, I think," hazarded Jan, trying to be correct in his good-nature. "Decima was in a veil."

"*Of course* she was," acquiesced Miss Amilly, with emphasis. "Did the bridemaids——"

What pertinent question, relating to the bridemaids, Miss Amilly was about to put, never was known. A fearful sound interrupted it. A sound nearly impossible to describe. Was it a crash of thunder? Had an engine from the distant railway taken up its station outside their house, and gone off with a bang? Or had the surgery blown up? The room they were in shook, the windows rattled, the Miss Wests screamed with real terror, and Jan started from his seat.

"It can't be an explosion of gas!" he muttered.

Bursting out of the room, he nearly knocked down Martha, who was bursting into it. Instinct, or perhaps sound, took Jan to the surgery, and they all followed in his wake. Bob, the image of terrified consternation, stood in the midst of a *débris* of glass, his mouth open, and his hair standing on end. The glass bottles and jars of the establishment had flown from their shelves, causing the unhappy Bob to believe that the world had come to an end.

But what was the *débris* there, compared with the *débris* in Jan's

room? The window was out, the furniture was broken, the various chemical apparatus had been shivered into a hundred pieces, the tamarind jar was in two, and Master Cheese was extended on the floor on his back, his hands scorched, his eyebrows singed off, his face black, and the end of his nose burning.

"Oh! that's it, is it?" said Jan, when his eyes took in the state of things. "I knew it would come to it."

"He have been and blowed hisself up," remarked Bob, who had stolen in after them.

"Is it the gas?" sobbed Miss Amilly, hardly able to speak from terror.

"No, it's not the gas," returned Jan, examining the *débris* more closely. "It's one of that gentleman's chemical experiments."

Deborah West was bending over the prostrate form in alarm. "He surely can't be dead!" she shivered.

"Not he," said Jan. "Come, get up," he added, taking Master Cheese by the arm to assist him.

He was placed in a chair, and there he sat, coming-to, and emitting dismal groans.

"I told you what you'd bring it to, if you persisted in attempting experiments that you know nothing about," was Jan's reprimand, delivered sharply. "A pretty state of things this "

Master Cheese groaned again.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Miss Deb, in sympathizing accents.

"Oh-o-o-o-o-o-h!" moaned Master Cheese.

"Is there anything we can get for you?" resumed Miss Deb.

"Oh-o-o-o-o-o-h!" repeated Master Cheese. "A glass of wine might revive me."

"Get up," said Jan, "and let's see if you can walk. He's not hurt, Miss Deb."

Master Cheese, yielding to the peremptory movement of Jan's arm, had no resource but to show them that he could walk. He had taken a step or two as dolefully as it was possible for him to take it, keeping his eyes shut, and stretching out his hands before him, after the manner of the blind, when an interruption came from Miss Amilly.

"What can this be, lying here?"

She was bending her head near the old bureau, which had been rent in the explosion, her eyes fixed upon some large letter or paper on the floor. They crowded round at the words. Jan picked it up, and found it to be a folded parchment bearing a great seal.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Jan.

On the outside was written, "Codicil to the will of Stephen Verner."

"What is it?" exclaimed Miss Deborah, and even Master Cheese contrived to get his eyes open to look.

"It is the lost codicil," replied Jan. "It must have been in that bureau. How did it get there?"

How indeed? There ensued a pause.

"It must have been placed there"—Jan was beginning, and then he stopped himself. He would not, before those ladies, say—"by Dr. West."

But to Jan it was now perfectly clear. That old hunting for the "prescription," which had puzzled him at the time, was explained now. *There* was the "prescription"—the codicil! Dr. West had had it in his hand when disturbed in that room by a stranger: he had flung it back into the bureau in his hurry; pushed it back: and by some means, he must have pushed it too far out of sight. And there it had lain until now, intact and undiscovered.

The hearts of the Miss Wests were turning to sickness, their countenances to pallor. That it could be no other than their father who had stolen the codicil from Stephen Verner's dying chamber was present to their conviction. His motive could only have been to prevent Verner's Pride from passing to Lionel, over his daughter and her husband. What did he think of his work when the news came of Frederick's death? What did he think of it when John Massingbird returned in person? What did he think of it when he read Sibylla's dying message, written to him by Amilly—"Tell papa it is leaving Verner's Pride that has killed me?"

"I shall take possession of this," said Jan Verner.

Master Cheese was conveyed to the house and consigned to bed, where his burnings were dressed by Jan, and restoratives administered to him, including the glass of wine.

The first thing on the following morning the codicil was handed over to Mr. Matiss. He immediately recognized it by its appearance. But it would be opened officially later on, in the presence of John Massingbird. Jan betook himself to Verner's Pride to carry the news, and found Mr. Massingbird astride on a pillar of the terrace steps, smoking away with gusto. The day was warm and sunny as the previous one had been.

"What, is it you?" cried he, when Jan came in sight. "You are up here betimes. Any one dying, this way?"

"Not this morning," replied Jan. "I say, Massingbird, there's ill news in the wind for you."

"What's that?" composedly asked John, tilting some ashes out of his pipe.

"That codicil has come to light."

John puffed on vigorously, staring at Jan, but never speaking.

"The thief must have been old West," went on Jan. "Only

think! It has been hidden all this while in that bureau of his, in my bedroom."

"What has unearthed it?" demanded Mr. Massingbird, satirically, as if he doubted the truth of the information.

"An explosion. Cheese got meddling with dangerous substances, and there was a blow-up. The bureau was thrown down and broken, and the codicil was dislodged. To talk of it, sounds like an old stage trick."

"Did Cheese blow himself up?" asked John Massingbird.

"Yes. But he came down again. He is in bed with burnt hands and a scorched face. If I had told him once to let that dangerous play alone—dangerous in his hands—I had told him ten times."

"Where's the codicil?" inquired Mr. Massingbird, smoking away.

"In Matiss's charge. You'd like to be present, I suppose, at the time of its being opened?"

"I can take your word for it," returned John Massingbird. "This does not surprise me. I have always had an impression that the codicil would turn up some time."

"It is more than I have had," dissented Jan.

As if by common consent, they spoke no further on the subject of the abstraction and its guilty instrument. It was not a pleasant theme to either. John Massingbird, little refinement of feeling though he possessed, could not forget that Dr. West was his mother's brother; or Jan that he was his late master, his present partner—connected with him in the eyes of Deerham. Before they had spoken much longer, they were joined by Lionel.

"I shall give you no trouble, old fellow," was John Massingbird's salutation. "You gave me none."

"Thank you," answered Lionel. Though what precise trouble it lay in John Massingbird's power to give him, he did not see, considering that things had now become so plain.

"You'll accord me house-room for a bit longer, though, won't you?"

"I will accord it you as long as you like," replied Lionel, in the warmth of his heart.

"You know I would have had you stop on here all along," remarked Mr. Massingbird; "but the bar to it was Sibylla. I am not sorry the thing's found. I am growing tired of my life here. It has come into my mind at times lately to think whether I should not give up to you, Lionel, and be off over the seas again. It's tame work, this, to one who has roughed it at the diggings."

"You'd not have done it," observed Jan, alluding to the giving up.

"Perhaps not," said John Massingbird; "but I have owed Lionel a debt for a long while. I say, old chap, didn't you think I clapped on a good sum for your trouble when I offered you the management of Verner's Pride?"

"I did," answered Lionel.

"Ay! I was in your debt; am in it still. Careless as I am, I thought of it now and then."

"I do not understand you," said Lionel. "In what way are you in my debt?"

"Let it go for now," returned John. "I may tell you some time, perhaps. When shall you take up your abode here?"

Lionel smiled. "I will not invade you without warning. You and I will take counsel together, John, and discuss plans and expediencies."

"I suppose you'll be for setting about your improvements now?"

"Yes," answered Lionel, his tone changing to one of deep seriousness, not to say reverence. "Without loss of time."

"I told you they could wait until you came into the estate. It has not been long first, you see."

"No; but I never looked for it," said Lionel.

"Ah! Things turn up that we don't look for," concluded John Massingbird, smoking on as serenely as though he had come into an estate, instead of having lost one. "There'll be bonfires all over the place to-night, Lionel. A left-handed compliment to me. Here comes Luke Roy. I told him to be here this morning. What nuts this will be for old Roy to crack! He has been fit to stick me, ever since I refused him the management of Verner's Pride."

CHAPTER LXXI.

LIGHT THROWN ON OBSCURITY.

And so, the trouble and the uncertainty, the ups and the downs, the turnings in and turnings out were at an end, and Lionel Verner was at rest. At rest as far as rest can be, in this lower world. He was reinstalled at Verner's Pride, its undisputed master; never again to be sent forth from it during life.

He had not done as John Massingbird did—gone right in, the first day, and taken up his place, *sans cérémonie*, without word and without apology, at the head of the table, leaving John to take his place at the side or the foot, or where he could. Quite the contrary. Lionel's refinement of mind, his sensitive consideration for the feelings of others, clung to him now, as it always had done, as it always would do, and he was chary of disturbing John

Massingbird too early in his sway at Verner's Pride. It had to be done, however; and John Massingbird remained on with him, his guest.

All that had passed: and the spring of the year was growing late. The codicil had been proved; the neighbourhood had tendered their congratulations to the new master, come into his own at last; the improvements, in which Lionel's conscience held so deep a score, were begun and in good progress; and John Massingbird's return to Australia was decided upon, and the day of his departure fixed. People surmised that Lionel would be glad to get rid of him, if only for the sake of his drawing-rooms. John Massingbird still lounged at full length on the amber satin couches, in slippers or dirty boots, as the case might be, still filled them with clouds of tobacco smoke, so that you could scarcely see across them. Mrs. Tynn declared to as many people as she dared, that she prayed every night on her bended knees for Mr. Massingbird's departure, before the furniture should be quite ruined, or they burnt up in their beds.

Mr. Massingbird was not going alone. Luke Roy was returning with him. Luke's intention always had been to return to Australia: he had only come home for a short visit to the old place and to see his mother. Luke had been doing well at the goldfields. He did not dig; but he sold liquor to those who did dig; at which he was making money rapidly. He had a "chum," he said, who managed the store while he was away. So glowing was his account of his prospects, that old Roy had decided upon going also, and trying his fortune there. Mrs. Roy looked aghast at the projected plan: she was too old for it, she urged. But she could not turn her husband. He had never studied her wishes too much, and he was not likely to begin to do so now. So Mrs. Roy, with incessant tears, and continued prognostications that sea-sickness would kill her, was forced to make her preparations for the voyage. Perhaps one motive, more than all else, influenced Roy's decision —to get out of Deerham. Since his hopes of having something to do with the Verner's Pride estate—as in Stephen Verner's time—had been at an end, Roy had gone about in a perpetual state of mortification. This emigration would put an end to it: and what with the anticipation of making a fortune at the diggings, his satisfaction at saying adieu to Deerham, and thwarting his wife, Roy was altogether in a state of complacency.

The time went on to the evening previous to the departure. Lionel and John Massingbird had dined alone, and now sat together at the open window, in the soft May twilight. A small table was at John's elbow; a bottle of rum, a jar of tobacco, water, and a glass being on it, ready to his hand. He had done his best to

infect Lionel with a taste for rum-and-water—as an excellent beverage to be taken at any hour from seven o'clock in the morning onwards—but Lionel had been proof against it. John had the rum-drinking to himself, as he had the smoking. Lionel had behaved liberally to him. It was not in Lionel Verner's nature to behave otherwise, no matter to whom. From the moment the codicil was found, John Massingbird had no further right to a sixpence of the revenues of the estate. He was in the position of one who has nothing. It was Lionel who had found means for all: for his expenses; his voyage; for a purse when he should reach Australia. John Massingbird was thinking of this as he sat now, smoking and taking the rum-and-water.

"If ever I turn to work with a will and become a hundred-thousand-pound man, old fellow," he suddenly broke out, "I'll pay you back. This, and also what I got rid of while the estate was in my hands."

Lionel, who had been looking from the window in a reverie, turned round and laughed. To imagine John Massingbird becoming a hundred-thousand-pound man through his own industry, was a stretch of fancy marvellously comprehensive.

"I have to make a clean breast of it to-night," resumed John Massingbird, after puffing away for some minutes in silence. "Do you remember my saying to you, the day we heard news of the codicil's being found, that I was in your debt?"

"I remember your saying it," replied Lionel. "I did not understand what you meant. You were not in my debt."

"Yes, I was. I had a score to pay off as big as the moon. It's as big still: for it's one that never can be paid off; never will be."

Lionel looked at him in surprise; his manner was so unusually serious.

"Fifty times, since I came back from Australia, have I been on the point of clearing myself of the secret. But, you see, there was Verner's Pride in the way. You would naturally have said upon hearing it, 'Give the place up to me; you can have no moral right to it.' And I was not prepared to give it up; it seemed too comfortable a nest after knocking about over yonder. Don't you perceive?"

"I don't perceive, and I don't understand," replied Lionel. "You are speaking in an unknown tongue."

"I'll speak more plainly, then. It was through me that old Ste Verner left Verner's Pride away from you."

"What!" uttered Lionel.

"True," nodded John, with composure. "I told him a—a bit of scandal of you. And the strait-laced old simpleton took and

altered his will on the strength of it. I did not know of that until afterwards."

"And the scandal?" asked Lionel, quietly. "What may it have been?"

"False scandal," carelessly answered John Massingbird. "But I thought it was true when I spoke it. I told your uncle that it was you who had played false with Rachel Frost."

"Massingbird!"

"Don't fancy I went to him open-mouthed, and said, 'Lionel Verner's the man.' A fellow who could do such a sneaking trick would be only fit for hanging. The avowal was surprised out of me in an unguarded moment: it slipped out in self-defence. I'd better tell you the tale."

"I think you had," said Lionel.

"You remember the bother there was, the night Rachel was drowned. I came home and found Mr. Verner sitting at the inquiry. It never struck me, then, to suspect that it could be any one of us three who had been in the quarrel with Rachel. I knew that I had had no finger in the pie; I had no reason to think that you had; and, as to Fred, I'd as soon have suspected staid old Verner himself: besides, I believed Fred to have eyes only for Sibylla West. Not but that the affair appeared to me unaccountably strange; for, beyond Verner's Pride, I did not think Rachel possessed an acquaintance."

He stopped to take a few whiffs at his pipe, and then resumed, Lionel listening in silence.

"On the following morning by daylight I went down to the Willow Pond. A few stragglers were already there. As we were looking about and talking, I saw on the very brink of the pond, partially hidden in the grass,—in fact trodden into it, as it seemed to me,—a glove. I picked it up, and was on the point of calling out that I had found a glove, when it struck me that the glove was yours. The others had seen me stoop, and one of them asked if I had found anything. I said 'No.' I had crushed the glove in my hand, and presently transferred it to my pocket."

"Your motive being good-nature to me?" interrupted Lionel.

"To be sure it was. To have shown that, as Lionel Verner's glove, would have fixed the affair on your shoulders at once. Why should I tell? I had been in scrapes myself. And I kept it, saying nothing to anybody. I examined the glove privately, saw it was really yours, and of course I drew my own conclusions—that it was you who had been in the quarrel. Though what cause of dispute you could have with Rachel, I was at a loss to divine. Next came the inquest, and the medical men's revelation at it: and that cleared up the mystery. 'Ho, ho,' I said to myself, 'so Master Lionel can

do a bit of courting on his own account, steady as he seems. I——"

"Did you assume that I threw her into the pond?" again interposed Lionel.

"Not a bit of it. What next, Lionel? To ignore some of the Commandments comes naturally enough to the conscience; but the sixth—one does not ignore that. I believed that you and Rachel might have come to loggerheads, and that she, in a passion, had flung herself in. I held the glove still in my pocket; it seemed to be the safest place for it: and I intended, before I left, to hand it over to you, and to give you my word I'd keep counsel. On the night of the inquest you were closeted in the study with Mr. Verner. I chafed at it, for I wished to be closeted with him myself. Unless I could get off from Verner's Pride the next day, there would be no chance of my sailing in the projected ship—where our passages had been already secured by Luke Roy. By-and-by you came into the dining-room—do you remember it?—and told me Mr. Verner wanted me in the study. It was just what *I* wanted: and I went in. I shan't forget my surprise to the last hour of my life. His greeting was an accusation of me: of *me:* that it was I who had played false with Rachel. He had proof, he said. One of the house-girls had seen one of us three young men coming from the scene that night—and he, Stephen Verner, knew it could only be me. Fred was too cautious, he said; Lionel he could depend upon; and he bitterly declared that he would not give me a penny piece of the promised money to take me on my way. A pretty state of things, to have one's projects put an end to in that manner. In my dismay and anger, I blurted out the truth: that one of us might have been seen coming from the scene, but it was not myself; it was Lionel: and I took the glove out of my pocket and showed it to him."

John Massingbird paused to take a draught of rum-and-water, and then resumed.

"I never saw any man so agitated as Mr. Verner. Upon my word, had I foreseen the effect the news would have had upon him, I hardly think I should have told it. His face turned ghastly; he lay back in his chair, uttering groans of despair; in short, it had completely prostrated him. I never knew how deeply he must have been attached to you, Lionel, until that night."

"He believed the story?" said Lionel.

"Of course he believed it," assented John Massingbird. "I told it him as a certainty, as a thing about which there was no admission for the slightest doubt: I assumed it, myself, to be a certainty. When he was a little recovered, he took possession of the glove, and bound me to secrecy. You would never have forgotten it, Lionel, had you seen his trembling hands, his imploring eyes, heard

his voice of despair; all lifted to beseech secrecy for you—for the sake of his dead brother—for the name of Verner—for his own sake. I heartily promised it: and he handed me over a more liberal sum than even I had expected, enjoined me to depart with the morrow's dawn, and bade me God-speed. I believe he was glad that I was going, lest I might drop some chance word during the present excitement of Deerham, and by that means direct suspicion to you. He need not have feared. I was already abusing myself mentally for having told *him*, although it had gained me my ends. 'Live and let live' had been my motto hitherto. The interview was nearly over when you came to interrupt it, asking if Mr. Verner would see Robin Frost. Mr. Verner answered that he might come in. He came; you and Fred with him. Do you recollect old Verner's excitement?—his vehement words in answer to Robin's request that a reward should be posted up? 'He'll never be found, Robin—the villain will never be found, so long as you and I and the world shall last.' I recollect them, you see, word for word, to this hour: but none, save myself, knew what caused Mr. Verner's excitement, or that the word 'villain' was applied to you. Upon my word of honour, old boy, I felt as if I had the deeper right to it! and I felt angry with old Verner for looking at the affair in so strong a light. But there was no help for it. I went away the next morning——"

"Stay!" interrupted Lionel. "A single word to me would have set the misapprehension straight. Why did you not speak it?"

"I wish I had, now. But—it wasn't done. There! The knowledge that turns up in the future we can't call to aid in the present. If I had had a doubt that it was you, I should have spoken. We were some days out at sea on our voyage to Australia when I and Luke got comparing notes; and I found, to my everlasting astonishment, that it was not you, after all, who had been with Rachel, but Fred."

"You should have written home, to do me justice with Mr. Verner. You ought not to have delayed one instant, when the knowledge came to you."

"And how was I to send the letter? Chuck it into the sea in the wake of the ship, and give it orders to swim back to port?"

"You might have posted it at the first place you touched at."

"Look here, Lionel. I never regarded it in that grave light. How was I to suppose that old Verner would disinherit you for that trumpery escapade? I never knew why he had disinherited you, until I came home and heard from yourself the story of the enclosed glove, which he left you as a legacy. It's since then that I have been wanting to make a clean breast of it. I say, only fancy Fred's deepness! We should never have thought it of him. The quarrel

between him and Rachel that night appeared to arise from the fact of her having seen him with Sibylla; having overheard that there was more between them than was pleasant to *her*. At least, so far as Luke could gather. Lionel, what should have brought your glove lying by the pond?"

"I am unable to say. I had not been there to drop it. The most feasible solution that I can come to, is, that Rachel may have had it about her for the purpose of mending it, and let it drop herself when she jumped in."

"Ay. That's the most likely. There was a hole in it, I remember; and it was Rachel who attended to such things in the household. It must have been so."

Lionel fell into a reverie. How—but for this mistake of John Massingbird's, this revelation to his uncle—the whole course of his life's events might have been changed! Verner's Pride bequeathed to him, never bequeathed at all to the Massingbirds, it was scarcely likely that Sibylla, in returning home, would have driven to Verner's Pride. Had she *not* driven to it that night, he might never have been so surprised by his old feelings as to have proposed to her. He might have married Lucy Tempest; have lived, sheltered with her in Verner's Pride from the storms of life; he might——

"Will you forgive me, old chap?"

It was John Massingbird who spoke, interrupting his day-dreams. Lionel shook them off, and took the offered hand stretched out.

"Yes," he heartily said. "You did not do me the injury intentionally. It was the result of a mistake, brought about by circumstances."

"No, that I did not, by Jove!" answered John Massingbird. "I don't think I ever did a fellow an intentional injury in my life. You would have been the last I should single out for it. I have had many ups and downs, Lionel, but somehow I have hitherto always managed to alight on my legs; and I believe it's because I let other folks get along. Tit for tat, you see. A fellow who is for ever putting his spoke in the wheel of others is safe to get spokes put back into his. I am not a model," comically added John Massingbird; "but I have never done wilful injury to others, and my worst enemy (if I possess one) can't charge it upon me."

True enough. With all Mr. John Massingbird's failings, his heart was not a bad one. In the old days his escapades had been numerous; his brother Frederick's, none (so far as the world knew); but the one was liked a thousand times better than the other.

"We part friends, old fellow!" he said to Lionel the following morning, when all was ready, and the moment of departure had come.

"To be sure we do," answered Lionel. "Should England ever see you again, you will not forget Verner's Pride."

"I don't think it ever will see me again. Thanks, old chap, all the same. If I should be done up some unlucky day for the want of a twenty-pound note, you won't refuse to let me have it, for old times' sake?"

"Very well," laughed Lionel.

And so they parted. And Verner's Pride was quit of Mr. John Massingbird, and Deerham of its *bête noire*, old Grip Roy. Luke had gone forward to make arrangements for sailing, as he had done once before; and Mrs. Roy took her seat with her husband in a third-class carriage, crying tears sufficient to float the train.

CHAPTER LXXII.

MEDICAL ATTENDANCE GRATIS.

As a matter of course, the discovery of the codicil, and the grave charge it served to establish against Dr. West, could not be hid under a bushel. Deerham was remarkably free in its comments, and was pleased to rake up various unpleasant reports, which from time to time in the former days had arisen, touching that gentleman. Deerham might say what it liked, and no one be much the worse; but a more serious question arose with Jan. Easy as Jan was, little given to thinking ill, even he could not look over this. Jan, if he would maintain his respectability as a medical man and a gentleman, if he would retain his higher class of patients, must give up his association with Dr. West.

The finding of the codicil had been communicated to Dr. West by Matiss, the lawyer, who officially demanded at the same time an explanation of its having been placed where it was found. The doctor replied to the communication, but conveniently ignored the question. He was 'charmed" to hear that the long-missing deed was found, which restored Verner's Pride to the rightful owner, Lionel Verner: but he appeared not to have read, or else not to have understood the very broad hint implicating himself; for not a word was returned to that part, in answer. The silence was not less a conclusive proof than the admission of guilt would have been; and it was so regarded by those concerned.

Jan was the next to write. A characteristic letter. He said not a word of reproach to the doctor; he appeared, indeed, to ignore the facts as completely as the doctor himself had done in answer to Matiss; he simply said that he would prefer to "get along" now alone. The practice had much increased, and there was room for

both. He would remove to another residence; a lodging would do, he said; and run his chance of patients coming to him. It was not his intention to take one from Dr. West by solicitation. The doctor could either come back and resume practice in person, or take a partner in place of him, Jan.

To this a bland answer was received. Dr. West was agreeable to the dissolution of partnership; but he had no intention of resuming practice in Deerham. He and his noble charge (who was decidedly benefiting by his care, skill, and companionship, he elaborately wrote) were upon the best of terms: his engagement with him was likely to be a long one (for the poor youth would require a personal guide up to his fortieth year, nay, to his eightieth, if he lived so long): and therefore (not to be fettered) he, Dr. West, was anxious to sever his ties with Deerham. He should never return to it. If Mr. Jan would undertake to pay him a trifling sum, say five hundred pounds, or so, he could have the entire business; and the purchase-money, if more convenient, might be paid by instalments. Mr. Jan of course would become sole proprietor of the house, (the rent of which had hitherto been paid out of the joint concern,) but perhaps he would not object to allow those "two poor old things, Deborah and Amilly, a corner in it." *He* should of course undertake to provide for them, remitting them a liberal annual sum. And Jan closed with the terms of purchase.

"I couldn't have done it six months ago, you know, Lionel," he said to his brother. "But now that you have come in again to Verner's Pride, you won't care to have my earnings any longer."

"What I shall care for now, Jan, will be to repay you; so far as I can. The money can be repaid; the kindness never."

"Law!" cried Jan, "that's nothing. Wouldn't you have done as much for me? I must get a new brass plate for the door. 'Jan Verner, Surgeon, etc.,' in place of the present one, 'West and Verner.'"

"I think I should put Janus Verner, instead of Jan," suggested Lionel, with a half-smile.

"Not I," answered Jan. "Nobody would know it was meant for me if I put Janus. Shall I have 'Mr.' tacked on to it, Lionel?—'Mr. Jan Verner.'"

"Of course you will," answered Lionel. "What is going to be done about Deborah and Amilly West? Their stopping on in the house will not be a desirable arrangement."

"They won't hurt me," responded Jan. "They are welcome."

"I think, Jan, your connection with the West family should be entirely closed. The opportunity offers itself now: and if not embraced, you don't know when another may arise. Suppose, a

short time hence, you were to marry? It might be painful to your feelings, then, to have to say to Deborah and Amilly—'You must leave my house: there's no further place for you in it.'"

Jan had opened his great eyes wonderingly at the words. "I marry!" uttered he. "What should bring me marrying? Nobody would have me. They can stop on in the house, Lionel. What does it matter? I don't see how I and Cheese should get on without them. Who'd make the pies? Cheese would die of chagrin, if he didn't get one every day. And look how Cheese bursts his buttons off!"

"I see a great deal of inconvenience in the way," persisted Lionel. "The house will be yours then. Upon what terms would they remain? As visitors, as lodgers—as what?"

Jan opened his eyes wider. "Visitors! lodgers!" cried he. "I don't know what you mean, Lionel. They'd stop on as they always have done—as though the house were theirs. They'd be welcome, for me."

"As you please, Jan. My motive in speaking was not ill-nature towards the Miss Wests; but regard for you. As the sisters of my late wife, I shall take care that they do not want—should their resources from Dr. West fail. He speaks of allowing them a liberal sum annually: but I fear they must not make sure that the promise will be carried out. Should it not be, they will have no one to look to, I expect, but myself."

"They won't want much," said Jan. "Just a trifle for their bonnets and shoes, and such like. I shall pay the house-bills, you know. In fact, I'd as soon give them enough for their clothes, as not. I dare say I should have it, even the first year, after paying expenses and old West's five hundred."

It was hopeless to contend with Jan upon the subject of money, especially when it was *his* money. Lionel said no more. But he had not the slightest doubt it would end in Jan's house being saddled with the Miss Wests: and that help for them from Dr. West would never come.

Miss West herself was thinking the same—that help from her father never would come.

This conversation between Jan and Lionel, had taken place at Verner's Pride, in the afternoon subsequent to the arrival of Dr. West's letter. Deborah West had also received one from her father. She learnt by it that he was about to retire from the partnership, and that Mr. Jan Verner would carry on the practice alone. The doctor intimated that she and Amilly would continue to live on in the house with Mr. Jan's permission, whom he had asked to afford them house-room; and he more loudly promised to transmit them one hundred pounds per annum, in stated payments, as might be convenient to him.

The letter was read three times over by both sisters. Amilly did not like it, but upon Deborah it made a painfully deep impression. Poor ladies! Since the discovery of the codicil they had gone about Deerham with veils over their faces and their heads down, inclined to think that lots in this world were dealt out all too unequally.

At the very time that Jan was at Verner's Pride that afternoon, Deborah sat alone in the dining-room, pondering over the future. Since the finding of the codicil, neither of the sisters had cared to seat themselves in state in the drawing-room, ready to receive visitors, should they call. They had no heart for it. They chose rather to sit in plain attire, and hide themselves in the humblest and most retired apartment. They took no pride now in anointing their scanty curls with castor oil, in contriving for their dress, in setting off their persons. Vanity seemed to have gone out for Deborah and Amilly West.

Deborah sat there in the dining-room, her hair looking grievously thin, her morning dress not changed for the old turned black silk of the afternoon. Her elbow rested on the faded and not very clean table-cover, and her fingers were running mechanically through that scanty hair. The prospect before her looked, to her mind, as hopelessly forlorn as she looked herself.

But it was necessary that she should gaze at the future steadily; should not turn aside from it in carelessness or in apathy; should face it, and make the best of it. If Jan Verner and her father were about to dissolve partnership, and the practice henceforth was to be Jan's, what was to become of her and Amilly? Taught by past experience, *she* knew how much dependence was to be placed upon her father's promise to pay them an income. Very little reliance indeed could be placed on Dr. West in any way: this very letter in her hand and the tidings it contained, might be true, or might be—pretty little cullings from Dr. West's imagination. The proposed dissolution of partnership she believed in: she had expected Jan to take the step ever since that night which restored the codicil.

"I had better ask Mr. Jan about it," she murmured. "It is of no use to remain in this uncertainty."

Rising from her seat, she proceeded to the side-door, opened it, and glanced cautiously out through the rain, not caring to be seen by strangers in her present attire. There was no one about, and she crossed the little path and entered the surgery. Master Cheese, with a somewhat scorchy look about the eyebrows, but full of strength and appetite as ever, turned round at her entrance.

"Is Mr. Jan in?" she asked.

"No, he is not," responded Master Cheese, speaking indistinctly.

for he had just filled his mouth from the jar of Spanish liquorice. "Did you want him, Miss Deb?"

"I wanted to speak to him," she replied. "Will he be long?"

"He didn't announce the hour of his return," replied Master Cheese. "I wish he *would* come back! If a message came for one of us, I don't care to go out in this rain: Jan doesn't mind it. It's sure to be my luck! The other day, when it was pouring cats and dogs, a summons came from Lady Hautley's. Jan was out, and I had to go, and got dripping wet. After all, it was only my lady's maid, with a rubbishing whitlow on her finger."

"Be so kind as tell Mr. Jan, when he does come in, that I should be glad to speak a word to him, if he can find time to step into the parlour."

Miss Deb turned back as she spoke, ran across through the rain, and sat down in the parlour, as before. She knew that she ought to go up and dress, but she had no spirits for it.

She sat there until Jan entered. Fully an hour, it must have been, and she had turned over all points in her mind, what could and what could not be done. It did not appear that much could be done. Jan came in, rather wet. On his road from Verner's Pride he had overtaken one of his poor patients, who was in delicate health, and had lent the woman his huge cotton umbrella, hastening on, himself, without one.

"Cheese says you wish to see me, Miss Deb."

Miss Deb turned round from her listless attitude, and asked Mr. Jan to take a chair. Mr. Jan responded by partially sitting down on the arm of one.

"What is it?" asked he, rather wonderingly.

"I have had a letter from Prussia this morning, Mr. Jan, from my father. He says you and he are about to dissolve partnership; that the practice will be carried on by you alone, on your own account; and that—but you had better read it," she broke off, taking the letter from her pocket, and handing it to Jan.

He ran his eyes over it. Dr. West's was not a plain handwriting, but Jan was accustomed to it. The letter was soon read.

"It's true, Miss Deb. The doctor thinks he shall not be returning to Deerham, and so I am going to take to the whole of the practice," continued Jan, who possessed too much innate good feeling to hint to Miss Deb of any other cause.

"Yes. But—it will place me and Amilly in a very embarrassing position, Mr. Jan," added the poor lady, her thin cheeks flushing painfully. "I—we shall have no right to remain in this house then."

"You are welcome to remain," said Jan.

Miss Deb shook her head. She felt, as she said, that they should have no "right to do so."

"I'd rather you did," pursued Jan, in his good-nature. "What do I and Cheese want with all this big house to ourselves? Besides, if you and Amilly go, who'd see to our shirts and the puddings?"

"When papa went away at first, was there not some arrangement made by which the furniture became yours?"

"No," stoutly answered Jan. "I paid something to him, to give me, as he called it, a half-share in it with himself. It was a stupid sort of arrangement, and one that I should never care to act upon, Miss Deb. The furniture is yours; not mine."

"Mr. Jan, you would give up your right in everything, I believe. You will never grow rich."

"I shall grow as rich as I want to, I dare say," was Jan's answer. "Things can go on just as usual, you know, Miss Deb, and I can pay the housekeeping bills. Your stopping here will be a saving," good-naturedly added Jan. "With nobody in the house to manage, except servants, only think the waste there'd be. Cheese would be for getting two dinners a day served, fish, and fowls, and tarts at each."

The tears were struggling in Deborah West's eyes. She did her best to repress them. but it could not be, and she gave way to them.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jan," she said. "Sometimes I feel as if there was no longer any place in the world for me and Amilly. You may be sure I would not mention it, but that you know it as well as I do—that there is, I fear, no dependence to be placed on this promise of papa's, to allow us an income. I have been thinking——"

"Don't let that trouble you, Miss Deb," interrupted Jan, tilting himself backwards over the arm of the chair in a very ungraceful fashion, and leaving his legs dangling. "Others will, if he wo—if he can't. Lionel has just been saying that, as Sibylla's sisters, he shall see that you don't want."

"You and he are very kind," she answered, the tears dropping faster than she could wipe them away. "But it seems to me the time is come when we ought to try and do something for ourselves. I have been thinking, Mr. Jan, that we might get a few pupils, I and Amilly. There's not a single good school in Deerham, as you know; I think we might establish one."

"So you might," said Jan, "if you'd like it."

"We should both like it. And perhaps you'd not mind our staying on in this house while we were getting a few together; establishing it, as it were. They would not put you out, I hope, Mr. Jan."

"Not they," answered Jan, "I shouldn't eat them. Look here,

Miss Deb, I'd doctor them for nothing. Couldn't you put that in the prospectus? It might prove an attraction."

It was a novel feature in a school prospectus, and Miss Deb had to take some minutes to consider it. She came to the conclusion that it would look remarkably well in print. "Medical attendance gratis."

"Including physic," put in Jan.

"Medical attendance gratis, including physic," repeated Miss Deb. "Mr. Jan, it would be sure to take with the parents. I am so much obliged to you. But I hope," she added, moderating her satisfaction, "that they'd not think it meant Master Cheese. People would not have much faith in him, I fear."

"Tell them to the contrary," answered Jan. "And Cheese will be leaving shortly, you know."

"True," said Miss Deb. "Mr. Jan," she added, a strange eagerness in her tone, in her meek blue eyes, "if we, I and Amilly, can only get into the way of doing something for ourselves, by which we may be a little independent, and look forward to be kept out of the workhouse in our old age, we shall feel as if removed from a dreadful nightmare. Circumstances have been preying upon us, Mr. Jan: care is making us begin to look old before we might have looked it."

Jan answered with a laugh. That notion of the workhouse was so good, he said. As well set on and think that he should come to the penitentiary! It had been no laughing matter, though, to the hearts of the two sisters, and Miss Deb sat on, crying silent tears. How many of these silent tears must be shed in the path through life! It would appear that the lot of some is only made to shed them, and to bear.

Meanwhile the spring was going on to summer—and in the strict order of precedence that conversation of Miss Deb's with Jan ought to have been related before the departure of John Massingbird and the Roys from Deerham. But it does not signify. The Miss Wests made their arrangements and sent out their prospectuses, and the others left: it all happened in the spring-time. That time was giving place to summer when the father of Lucy Tempest, now Colonel Sir Henry Tempest, landed in England.

In some degree his arrival was sudden. He had been expected so long, that Lucy had almost given up looking for him. She did believe he was on his road home by the long sea-passage, but precisely when he might be expected, she did not know.

Since the marriage of Decima, Lucy had lived on alone with Lady Verner. Alone, and very quietly; quite uneventfully. She and Lionel met occasionally, but nothing further had passed between them. Lionel was silent: possibly he deemed it too soon

after his wife's death to speak of love to another: although to speak of it would have been news to neither. Lucy was a great deal at Lady Hautley's. Decima would have had her there permanently: but Lady Verner negatived it.

They were sitting at breakfast one morning, Lady Verner and Lucy, when the letter arrived. It was the only one by the post that morning. Catherine laid it by Lady Verner's side, to whom it was addressed: but Lucy's quick eyes caught the superscription.

"Lady Verner! It is papa's handwriting."

Lady Verner turned her head to look at it. "It is not an Indian letter," she remarked.

"No. Papa must have landed."

Opening the letter, they found it to be so. Sir Henry had arrived at Southampton. Lucy turned pale with agitation. It seemed a formidable thing, now it had come so near, to meet her father, whom she had not seen for so many years. Sir Henry might be expected on the morrow, and he would then take Lucy with him to London.

Lucy toyed with her tea-spoon, toyed with her breakfast: but the suddenness of the announcement had taken away her appetite, and a hundred doubts were tormenting her. Should she never again return to Deerham!—never again see Lionel?

The time went on to the afternoon, and Lady Verner told Lucy they must go out to make a call on Mrs. Bitterworth, who was very ill. Lucy dutifully acquiesced.

As they passed Dr. West's old house, Lady Verner ordered the carriage to turn the corner and stop at the door. "Mr. Jan Verner" was on the plate now, where "West and Verner" used to be. Master Cheese unwillingly disturbed himself to come out, for he was seated over a washhand-basin of gooseberry fool, which he had got surreptitiously made for him in the kitchen. Mr. Jan was out, he said.

So Lady Verner ordered the carriage on, leaving a message for Jan that she wanted some more "drops" made up.

They went on to Mrs. Bitterworth's. Her maid came out and said her mistress was too poorly that day to be seen, and that her master had gone to call on Mr. Verner. A sudden beating of the heart, a mist for a moment before her eyes, and Lucy was being whirled to Verner's Pride. Lady Verner had ordered the carriage thither.

They found Mr. Bitterworth in the drawing-room with Lionel. He had risen to leave. Lady Verner interrupted them with the news of Lucy's departure.

"Sir Henry will be here to-morrow," she said to Lionel. "He takes Lucy to London with him the following day."

Lionel, startled, looked round at Lucy. She was not looking at him. Her eyes were averted—her face was flushed.

"But you are not going for good, Miss Lucy!" cried Mr. Bitterworth.

"She is," replied Lady Verner. "And glad enough, I am sure, she must be, to get away from stupid Deerham. She little thought when she came to it, that her sojourn in it would be so long as this. I have seen rebellion, at her having to stop in it, rising often."

Mr. Bitterworth went out on the terrace. Lady Verner, talking to him, went also. Lionel, his face pale, his voice full of emotion, turned to Lucy.

"*Need* you go for good, Lucy?"

She raised her eyes to him with a shy glance, and Lionel caught her to his breast, and took his first long silent kiss of love from her lips. It was not like those carelessly snatched kisses of years ago.

"My darling! my darling! God alone knows what my love for you has been."

Another shy glance at him through her tears. Her heart was beating against his. Did the glance seem to ask why, then, had he not spoken? His next words would imply that he understood it so.

"I am still a poor man, Lucy. I was waiting for Sir Henry's return, to lay the case before him. He may refuse you to me!"

"If he should—I will tell him—that I shall never have further interest in life," was her agitated answer.

And Lionel's own face betrayed no less emotion, as he kissed those tears away.

At last! at last

CHAPTER LXXIII.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN JAN.

THE afternoon express was steaming into Deerham station, just as Jan Verner was leaping with his long legs over rails and stones and shafts, and other obstacles apt to collect round the outside of a railway station, to get to it. Jan did not want to get to the train; he had no business with it. He only wished to say a word to one of the railway-porters, whose wife he was attending. By the time he had reached the platform the train was puffing on again, and the few passengers who had descended were about to disperse.

"Can you tell me my way to Lady Verner's?"

The words were spoken close to Jan's ear. He turned and looked at the speaker. An oldish man with a bronzed countenance and

upright carriage, bearing about him that indescribable military air which bespeaks the soldier of long service, in plain clothes though he may be.

"Sir Henry Tempest!" involuntarily spoke Jan, before the official addressed had time to answer the question. "I heard my mother, Lady Verner, say she was expecting you."

Sir Henry Tempest ran his eyes over Jan's face and figure. An honest face, but an ungainly figure: loose clothes that would have been all the better for a brush, and the edges of his high shirt-collar jagged out.

"Mr. Verner?" responded Sir Henry, doubtingly.

"Not Mr. Verner. I'm only Jan. You must have forgotten me long ago, Sir Henry."

Sir Henry Tempest held out his hand. "I have not forgotten what you were as a boy; but I should not have known you as a man. And yet—it is the same face."

"Of course it is," said Jan. "Ugly faces, such as mine, don't alter. I will walk with you to my mother's: it is close by. Have you any luggage?"

"Only a portmanteau. My servant is looking after it. Here he is."

A dark man came up—an Indian—almost as old as his master. Jan recognized him.

"I remember you!" he exclaimed. "It is Batsha."

The man laughed, hiding his dark eyes, but showing his white teeth. "Massa Jan!" he said. "Used to call me Bat."

Without the least ceremony, Jan shook him by the hand. He had more pleasant reminiscences of him than of his master. In fact, Jan could only remember Colonel Tempest by name. He, the Colonel, had despised and shunned the awkward and unprepossessing boy: but the boy and Bat used to be great friends.

"Do you recollect carrying me on your shoulder, Bat? You have paid for many a ride in a palanquin for me. Riding on shoulders or in palanquins, in those days, used to be my choice recreation. The shoulders and the funds both ran short at times."

Batsha remembered it all. Next to his master, he had never liked any one so well as the boy Jan.

"Stop where you are a minute or two," said unceremonious Jan to Sir Henry. "I must find one of the porters, and then I'll walk with you."

Looking about in various directions, in holes and corners and sheds,—inside carriages and behind trucks, Jan at length came upon a short, surly-looking man, wearing the official uniform. It was the one of whom he was in search.

"I say, Parkes, what is this I hear about your forcing your wife

to get up, when I have given orders that she should lie in bed? I went in just now, and there I found her dragging herself about the damp brewhouse. I had desired that she should not get out of her bed."

"Too much bed don't do nobody any good, sir," returned the man, resentfully. "There's the work to do—the washing: if she don't do it, who will?"

"Too much bed wouldn't do you good; or me, either: but it is necessary for your wife in her present state of health. I have ordered her to bed again. Don't let me hear of your interfering a second time, and forcing her up. She is going to have a blister on now."

"I didn't force her, sir," answered Parkes. "I only asked her what was to become of the work, and how I should get a clean shirt to put on."

"If I had a sick wife, I'd wash out my shirt myself, before I'd drag her out of bed to do it," retorted Jan. "I can tell you one thing, Parkes: she is worse than you think for. I am not sure that she will be long with you: and you won't get such a wife again in a hurry, once you lose her. Give her a chance to get well. I'll see that she gets up fast enough, when she is fit for it."

Parkes touched his peaked cap as Jan turned away. It was very rare that Jan came out with a lecture: and when he did, the sufferers did not like it. A sharp word from Jan Verner seemed to tell home.

Jan returned to Sir Henry Tempest, and they walked away in the direction of Deerham Court.

"I conclude all is well at Lady Verner's," remarked Sir Henry.

"Well enough," returned Jan. "I thought you were not coming until to-morrow. They'll be surprised."

"I wrote word I should be with them to-morrow," replied Sir Henry. "But I grew impatient to see my child. Since I left India and have been fairly on my way to her, the time of separation has seemed longer to me than it did in all the previous years."

"She's a nice girl," returned Jan. "The nicest girl in Deerham."

"Is she pretty?" asked Sir Henry.

The question a little puzzled Jan. "Well, I think so," answered he. "Girls are much alike for that, as far as I see. I like Miss Lucy's look, though: and that's the chief thing in faces."

"How is your brother, Janus?"

Jan burst out laughing. "Don't call me Janus, Sir Henry. I am not known by that name. They wanted me to have Janus on my door-plate; but nobody would have thought it meant me, and the practice might have gone off."

"You are Jan, as you used to be, then? I remember Lucy has called you so in her letters to me."

"I shall never be anything but Jan. What does it matter? One name's as good as another. You were asking after Lionel. He has Verner's Pride again. All safely now."

"What an extraordinary course of events seems to have taken place with regard to Verner's Pride!" remarked Sir Henry. "Now your brother's, now not his; then his again, then not his! I cannot make it out."

"It was extraordinary," assented Jan. "But the uncertain tenure is at an end, and Lionel is installed there for life. There ought never to have been any question of his right to it."

"He has had the misfortune to lose his wife," observed Sir Henry.

"It was not much of a misfortune," returned Jan, always plain-spoken. "She was too sickly ever to enjoy life: and I know she must have worried Lionel nearly out of all patience."

Jan had said at the station that Deerham Court was "close by." His active legs may have found it so; but Sir Henry began to think it rather far than close. As they reached the gates Sir Henry spoke.

"I suppose there's an inn near, where I can send my servant to lodge. There may not be accommodation for him at Lady Verner's?"

"There's accommodation enough for that," said Jan. "They have plenty of room, and old Catherine can make him up a bed."

Lady Verner and Lucy were out. They had not returned from their calls—for it was the afternoon spoken of in the last chapter. Jan showed Sir Henry in, told him to ring for any refreshment he wanted; and then left.

"I can't stay," he remarked. "My day's rounds are not over yet."

But scarcely had Jan reached the outer gate when he met the carriage. He put up his hand, and the coachman stopped. Jan advanced to the window, a broad smile upon his face.

"What will you give me for some news, Miss Lucy?"

Lucy's thoughts were running upon certain other news; news known only to herself and to one more. A strangely happy light shone in her soft brown eyes, as she turned them on Jan; a rich damask was on the cheeks where *his* lips had so lately been.

"Does it concern me, Jan?"

"It doesn't much concern any one else.—Guess."

"I never can guess anything; you know I can't, Jan," she answered. "You must please tell me."

"Well," said Jan, "there's an arrival. Come by the train."

"Oh, Jan! Not papa?"

Jan nodded.

"You will find him indoors. Old Bat's come with him."

Lucy never could quite remember the details of the meeting. She knew that her father held her to him fondly, and then put her from him to look at her; the tears blinding her eyes and his.

"You *are* pretty, Lucy," he said. "Very pretty. I asked Jan whether you were not, but he could not tell me."

"Jan!" slightingly spoke Lady Verner, while Lucy laughed in spite of her tears. "It is of no use asking Jan anything of that sort, Sir Henry. I don't believe Jan knows one young lady's face from another."

It seemed to be all confusion for some time: all bustle; nothing but questions and answers. But when they had assembled in the drawing-room again, dressed for dinner, things wore a calmer aspect.

"You must have thought I never was coming home!" remarked Sir Henry to Lady Verner. "I have contemplated it so long."

"I suppose your delays were unavoidable," she answered.

"Yes—in a measure. I should not have come now, but for relieving you of Lucy. Your letters, for some time past, have appeared to imply that you were vexed with her; or tired of her. And in truth I have taxed your patience and good-nature unwarrantably. I do not know how I shall repay your kindness, Lady Verner."

"I have been repaid throughout, Sir Henry," was the quiet reply of Lady Verner. "The society of Lucy has been a requital in full. I rarely form an attachment, and when I do form one it is never demonstrative; but I have learned to love Lucy as I love my own daughter, and it will be a grief to part with her. Not but that she has given me great vexation."

"Ah! In what way?"

"The years have gone on and on since she came to me; and I was in hope of returning her to you with some prospect in view of the great end of a young lady's life—marriage. I was placed here as her mother; and I felt more responsibility in regard to her establishment in life than I did to Decima's. We have been at issue upon the point, Sir Henry: Lucy and I."

Sir Henry turned his eyes on his daughter. A fair picture was she, sitting there in her white evening dress and her pearl ornaments. Young, lovely, girlish, she looked, as she did the first day she came to Lady Verner's and took up her modest seat on the hearthrug. Sir Henry Tempest had not seen many such faces as that; he had not met with many natures so innocent and charming. Lucy was made to be admired as well as loved.

"If there is one *parti* more desirable than another in the whole county, it is Lord Garle," resumed Lady Verner. "The eldest

son of the Earl of Elmsley, his position naturally renders him so: but had he neither rank nor wealth, he would scarcely be less desirable. His looks are prepossessing; his qualities of head and heart are admirable; he enjoys the respect of all. Not a young lady for miles round but—I will use a vulgar phrase, Sir Henry, but it is expressive of the facts—would jump at him. Lucy refused him.

"Indeed," replied Sir Henry, gazing at Lucy's glowing face, at the smile that hovered round her lips. Lady Verner resumed:

"She refused him in the most positive manner that you can imagine. She has refused also one or two others. They were not so desirable in position as Lord Garle; but they were very well. And her motive I never have been able to get at. It has vexed me much: I have pointed out to her that whenever you returned home, you might think I had been neglectful of her interests."

"No, no," replied Sir Henry, "I could not fancy coming home to find Lucy married. I should not have liked it: she would have seemed to be gone from me."

"But she must marry some time, and the years are going on," returned Lady Verner.

"Yes, I suppose she must."

"At least, I should say she would, were it any one but Lucy," rejoined Lady Verner, qualifying her words. "After the refusal of Lord Garle, one does not know what to think. You will see him and judge for yourself."

"What was your motive for refusing him, Lucy?" inquired Sir Henry.

He spoke with a smile, in gay, careless tones; but Lucy appeared to take the question seriously. Her eyelids drooped, her demeanour became almost agitated.

"I did not care to marry, papa," she answered. "I did not care for Lord Garle."

"One grievous fear has been upon me ever since, haunting my rest at night, disturbing my peace by day," resumed Lady Verner. "I must speak of it to you, Sir Henry. Absurd as the notion really is, and as at times it appears to me that it must be, still it does intrude, and I should scarcely be acting an honourable part by you to conceal it, sad as the calamity would be."

Lucy looked up in surprise. Sir Henry in a sort of wonder.

"When she refused Lord Garle, whom she acknowledged she *liked*, and forbade him to entertain any future hope whatever, I naturally began to search for the cause. I could only come to one conclusion, I am sorry to say—that she cared too much for another."

Lucy sat in an agony; her face pale with apprehension.

"I arrived at the conclusion, I say," continued Lady Verner, "and I began to consider whom the object could be. I called over in my mind all the gentlemen she was in the habit of seeing; and unfortunately there was only one—only one upon whom my suspicions could settle. I recalled phrases of affection openly lavished upon him by Lucy; I remembered that there was no society she seemed to enjoy and be so much at ease with as his. I have done what I could since to keep him at arm's length; and I shall never forgive myself for having been so blind. But, you see, I no more thought she, or any other girl, could fall in love with him, than that——"

"Lady Verner, you should not say it!" burst forth Lucy with vehemence, as she turned her white face, her trembling lips, to Lady Verner. "Surely I might refuse to marry Lord Garle without caring unduly for another!"

Lady Verner looked quite aghast at the outburst. "My dear, does not this prove that I am right?"

"But who is it?" interupted Sir Henry Tempest.

"Alas!—Who! I could almost faint in telling it to you," groaned Lady Verner. "My unfortunate son, Jan."

The relief was so great to Lucy; the revulsion of feeling so sudden; the idea called up altogether so comical, that she clasped her hands one within the other, and laughed out in glee.

"Oh, Lady Verner! Poor Jan! I never thought you meant him. Papa," she said, turning eagerly to Sir Henry, "Jan is downright worthy and good, but I should not like to marry him."

"Jan may be worthy; but he is not handsome," gravely remarked Sir Henry.

"He is better than handsome," returned Lucy. "I shall love Jan all my life, papa. But not in that way."

Her perfect openness, her ease of manner, gave an earnest of the truth with which she spoke: and Lady Verner was summarily relieved of the fear which had haunted her rest.

"Why could you not have told me this before, Lucy?"

"Dear Lady Verner, how could I tell you? How was I to know anything about it?"

"True," said Lady Verner. "I *was* simple; to suppose any young lady could ever give a thought to that unfortunate Jan! You saw him, Sir Henry. Only fancy *his* being my son and his father's!"

"He is certainly not like either of you," was Sir Henry's reply. "Your other son was like both. Very like his father."

"Ah! he *is* a son," spoke Lady Verner, in her enthusiasm. "A son worth having; a son that his father would be proud of, were he

alive. Handsome, good, noble;—there are few like Lionel Verner. I spoke in praise of Lord Garle, but he is not as Lionel. A good husband, a good son, a good *man*. His conduct under his misfortunes was admirable."

"His misfortunes have been like a romance," remarked Sir Henry.

"More like that than reality. You will see him presently. I asked him to dine with me, and expect him in every moment. Ah, he has had trouble in all ways. His wife brought him nothing else."

"Jan dropped a hint of that," said Sir Henry. "I should think he would not be in a hurry to marry again!"

"I should think not, indeed. He—Lucy, where are you going?"

Lucy turned with her flushed face. "Nowhere, Lady Verner."

"I thought I heard a carriage stop, my dear. See if it is Lionel."

Lucy walked to the window in the other room. Sir Henry followed her. The blue and silver carriage of Verner's Pride was at the court gates, Lionel stepping from it. He came in, looking curiously at the grey head next to Lucy's.

"A noble form, a noble face!" murmured Sir Henry Tempest.

He still wore the mourning for his wife. A handsome man never looks so well in any other attire. There was no doubt that he divined now who the stranger was, and a glad smile of welcome parted his lips. Sir Henry met him on the threshold, and grasped both his hands.

"I should have known you, Lionel, anywhere, from your likeness to your father."

Lionel could not let the evening pass without speaking of the great secret. When he and Sir Henry were left together in the dining-room, he sought his opportunity. It was afforded by a remark of Sir Henry's.

"After our sojourn in London shall be over, I must look out for a residence, and settle down. Perhaps I shall purchase one. But I must first of all ascertain what locality would be agreeable to Lucy."

"Sir Henry," said Lionel, in low tones, "Lucy's future residence is fixed upon—if you will accord your permission."

Sir Henry Tempest, who was in the act of raising his wine-glass to his lips, set it down again and looked at Lionel.

"I want her at Verner's Pride."

It appeared that Sir Henry could not understand—did not take in the meaning of the words.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I have loved her for years," answered Lionel, the scarlet of

emotion rising to his cheeks. "We—we have known each other's sentiments a long while. But I did not intend to speak more openly to Lucy until I had seen you. To-day, however, in the sudden excitement of hearing of her contemplated departure, I betrayed myself. Will you give her to me, Sir Henry?"

Sir Henry Tempest looked grave. "It cannot have been so very long an attachment," he observed. "The time since your wife's death can only be counted by months."

"True. But the time, since I loved Lucy, can be counted by years. I loved her before I married," he added almost in a whisper.

"Why, then, have married another?" demanded Sir Henry, after a pause.

"You may well ask it, Sir Henry," replied Lionel, the upright line in his brow showing out just then all too deep and plainly. "I engaged myself to my first wife in an unguarded moment: as soon as the word was spoken I became aware that she was less dear to me than Lucy. I might have retracted: but that would have left a stain on my honour that could never be effaced. I am not the first man who has paid by years of penitence for a word spoken in the heat of passion."

True enough! Sir Henry simply nodded his head in answer.

"Yes, I loved Lucy; I married another, loving her; I never ceased to love her throughout my married life. And I had to force down my feelings; to suppress and hide them in the best way I could."

"And Lucy!" involuntarily uttered Sir Henry.

"Lucy—may I dare to say it to you?—loved me," he answered, his breath coming fast. "I believe, from my very heart, that she loved me in that early time, as deeply perhaps as I loved her. I have never exchanged a word with her upon the point; but I cannot conceal from myself that it was the unhappy fact."

"Did you know it at the time?"

"No!" he answered, raising his hand to his brow. "I did not suspect it until it was too late; until I was married. She was so child-like."

Sir Henry Tempest sat in silence, probably revolving the information.

"If you had known it—what then?"

"Do not ask me," replied Lionel, his tone full of pain. "I cannot tell what I should have done. It would have been Lucy—love—versus honour. And a Verner never sacrificed honour yet. And yet—it seems to me that I sacrificed honour in the course I took. Let the question drop, Sir Henry. It is a time I cannot bear to recur to."

Neither spoke for some minutes. Lionel's face was shaded by his hand. Presently he looked up.

"Do not part us, Sir Henry!" he implored. "We could neither of us bear it. I have waited for her long."

"I will deal candidly with you," said Sir Henry. "In the old days it was a favourite project of mine and your father's that our families should become connected by the union of our children—you and Lucy. We only spoke of it to each other; saying nothing to our wives: they might have set to work, woman fashion, and urged it on by plotting and planning: *we* were content to let events take their course, and to welcome the fruition, should it come. Nearly the last words Sir Lionel said to me, when he was dying of his wound, were, that he should not live to see the marriage; but he hoped I might. Years afterwards, when Lucy was placed with Lady Verner—I knew no other friend in Europe to whom I would entrust her—her letters to me were filled with Lionel Verner. 'Lionel was so kind to her!'—'Every one liked Lionel!' In one shape or other you were sure to be the theme. I heard how you lost the estate; of your coming to stay at Lady Verner's; of a long illness you had there; of your regaining the estate through the death of the Massingbirds; and—next—of your marriage to Frederick Massingbird's widow. From that time Lucy said less: in fact, her letters were nearly silent as to you: and, for myself, I never gave another thought to the subject. Your present communication has taken me entirely by surprise."

"But you will give her to me?"

"I had rather—forgive me if I speak candidly—that she married one who had not called another woman wife."

"I heartily wish I never had called another woman wife," was the response of Lionel. "But I cannot alter the past. I shall not make Lucy the less happy; and, for loving her—I tell you that my love for her, throughout, has been so great, as to have put it almost beyond the power of suppression."

A servant entered, and said my lady was waiting tea. Lionel waved his hand towards the man with an impatient movement, and they were left at peace again.

"You tell me that her heart is engaged in this, as well as yours?" resumed Sir Henry.

A half-smile flitted for a moment over Lionel's face: he was recalling Lucy's whispered words to him that very afternoon.

"Yes," he answered, "her heart is bound up in me: I may almost say her life. If ever love served its apprenticeship, Sir Henry, ours has. It is stronger than time and change."

"Well, I suppose you must have her," conceded Sir Henry. "But for your own marriage, I should have looked on this as a natural result. What about the revenues of Verner's Pride?"

"I am in debt," freely acknowledged Lionel. "In my wife's time we spent too much, and outran our means. Half my income for three or four years must be set apart to pay it off."

He might have said, "In my wife's time *she* spent too much;" said it with truth. But, as he spared her feelings, living, so he spared her memory, dead.

"Whoever takes Lucy, takes thirty thousand pounds on her wedding-day," quietly remarked Sir Henry Tempest.

The words quite startled Lionel. "Thirty thousand pounds!" he repeated mechanically.

"Thirty thousand pounds. Did you think I should waste all my best years in India, Lionel, and save up nothing for my only child?"

"I never thought about it," was Lionel's answer. "Or, if I ever did think, I suppose I judged by my father. He saved no money."

"He had not the opportunity that I have had. And he died early. The appointment I held, out there, has been a lucrative one. That will be the amount of Lucy's present fortune."

"I am glad I did not know it!" heartily affirmed Lionel.

"It might have made the winning her more difficult, I suppose you think?"

"Not the winning *her*," was Lionel's answer, the self-conscious smile again on his lips. "The winning your consent, Sir Henry."

"It has not been so hard a task, either," quaintly remarked Sir Henry, as he rose. "I am giving her to you, understand, for your father's sake. In the trust that you are the same honourable, good man, standing well before the world and Heaven, that he was. Unless your looks belie you, you are not degenerate."

Lionel stood before him, almost too agitated to speak. Sir Henry stopped him, laying his hand upon his shoulder.

"No thanks, Lionel. Gratitude? You can repay all that to Lucy after she shall be your wife."

They went together into the drawing-room, arm-in-arm. Sir Henry advanced straight to his daughter.

"What am I to say to you, Lucy? He has been talking secrets."

She looked up, like a startled fawn. But a glimpse at Lionel's face reassured her, bringing the roses into her cheeks. Lady Verner, wondering, gazed at them in amazement, and Lucy hid her hot cheeks on her father's breast.

"Am I to scold you? Falling in love without my permission!"

The tone, the loving arm wound round her, brought confidence to her. She could almost afford to be saucy.

"Don't be angry, papa!" were her whispered words. "It might have been worse."

"Worse!" returned Sir Henry, trying to get a look at her face. "You independent child! How could it have been worse?"

"It might have been Jan, you know, papa."

And Sir Henry Tempest burst into an irrepressible laugh as he sat down.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

SUNDRY ARRIVALS.

We have had many fine days in this history, but never a finer gladdened Deerham than the last that has to be recorded, ere its scene in these pages shall close. It was one of those strangely lovely days that now and then do come to us in autumn. The air was clear, the sky bright, the sun hot as in summer, the grass green almost as in spring. It was evidently a day of rejoicing. Deerham, since the afternoon, seemed to be taking holiday, and as the sun began to get lower in the heavens, groups in their best attire were wending their way towards Verner's Pride.

There was the centre of attraction. A *fête*—or whatever you may please to call it, where a great deal of feasting is going on—was about to be held on no mean scale. Innumerable tables, some large, some small, were set out in different parts of the grounds, their white cloths intimating that they were to be laden with good cheer. Tynn and his satellites bustled about, and believed they had never had such a day of work before.

A day of pleasure also, unexampled in their lives: for their master, Lionel Verner, was about to bring home his bride.

Every one was flocking to the spot: old and young, gentle and simple. The Elmsleys and the half-starved Hooks; the Hautleys and those ill-doing Dawsons; the Miss Wests and their pupils; Lady Verner and the Frosts; Mr. Bitterworth in a hand-chair, his gouty foot swathed in linen; Mrs. Duff, who had shut up her shop to come; Dan, in some new clothes; Mr. Peckaby and his lady; Chuff the blacksmith, with rather a rolling gait; and Master Cheese and Jan. In short, all Deerham and its neighbourhood had turned out.

This was to be Master Cheese's last appearance on any scene—as far as Deerham was concerned. The following day he would quit Jan for good; and that gentleman's new assistant, a qualified practitioner, had arrived, and was present. Somewhat different arrangements from those originally contemplated were about to be entered on, as regarded Jan. The Miss Wests had found their school prosper so well during the half-year it had been established,

that they were desirous of taking the house entirely on their own hands. They commanded the good-will and respect of Deerham, if their father did not. Possibly it was because he did not, and that their position was sympathized with and commiserated, that their scheme of doing something to make themselves independent of him obtained so large a share of patronage. They wished to take the whole house on their own hands. Easy Jan acquiesced; Lionel thought it the best thing in all ways; and Jan began to look out for another home. But Jan seemed to waver in fixing upon one. First, he thought of lodgings; next he went to see a small, pretty new house that had just been built close to the Miss Wests'. "It is too small for you, Mr. Jan," had observed Miss Deborah. "It will hold me and my assistant, and the boy, and a cook, and the surgery," answered Jan. "And that's all I want."

Neither the lodgings, however, nor the small house had been taken; and now it was rumoured that Jan's plans were changed again. The report ran that the surgery was to remain where it was, and that the assistant, a gentleman of rather mature age, would remain with it; occupying Jan's bedroom (which had been renovated after the explosion of Master Cheese), and taking his meals with the Miss Wests: Jan meanwhile being about that tasty mansion called Belvidere House, which was situated midway between his old residence and Deerham Court. Deerham's curiosity was uncommonly excited upon the point. What, in the name of wonder, could plain Jan Verner want with so fine a place? He'd have to keep five or six servants, if he went there. The most feasible solution that could be arrived at was, that Jan was about to establish a mad-house—as Deerham was in the habit of phrasing a receptacle for insane patients—of the private, genteel order. Deerham felt *very* curious; and Jan, being a person whom they felt at liberty to question without ceremony, was besieged upon the subject. Jan's answer (all they could get from him this time) was—that he *was* thinking of taking Belvidere House, but had no intention yet of setting up a mad-house. And affairs were in this stage at the present time.

Lionel and his bride were expected momentarily, and the company of all grades formed themselves into groups as they awaited them. They had been married in London some ten days before, where Sir Henry Tempest had remained, after quitting Deerham with Lucy. The twelvemonth had been allowed to go by after the death of Sibylla. Lionel liked that all things should be done seemly and in order. Sir Henry was now on a visit to Sir Edmund Hautley and Decima: he was looking out for a suitable residence in the neighbourhood, where he meant to settle. This gathering at Verner's Pride to welcome Lionel had been a thought of Sir

Henry's and old Mr. Bitterworth's. "Why not give the poor an afternoon's holiday for once?" cried Sir Henry. "I will repay them the wages they must lose in taking it." And so—here was the gathering, and Tynn had carried out his orders for the supply of plenty to eat and drink.

They formed in groups, listening for the return of the carriage, which had gone in state to the railway station to receive them. All, save Master Cheese. He walked about somewhat disconsolately, thinking the proceedings rather slow. In his wanderings he came upon Tynn, placing good things upon one of the tables, which was laid in an alcove.

"When's the feasting going to begin?" asked he.

"Not until Mr. Verner shall have come," replied Tynn. "The people will be wanting to cheer him ; and they can't do that well, if they are busy round the tables, eating"

"Who's the feast intended for?" resumed Master Cheese.

"It's chiefly intended for those who don't get feasts at home," returned Tynn. "But anybody can partake of it that pleases."

"I should like just a snack," said Master Cheese. "I had such a short dinner to-day. Now that all those girls are stuck down at the dining-table, Miss Deb sometimes forgets to ask one a third time to meat," he added in a grumbling tone. "And there was nothing but a rubbishing rice-pudding after it to-day! So I'd like to take a little, Tynn. I feel quite empty."

"You can take as much as you choose," said Tynn, who had known Master Cheese's appetite before to-day. "Begin at once, if you like, without waiting for the others. Some of the tables are spread."

"I think I will," said Master Cheese, looking lovingly at a pie on the table over which they were standing. "What's inside this, Tynn?"

Tynn bent his head to look more closely. "I think that's partridge," said he. "There are plenty of other sorts. And there's a vast quantity of cold meats : beef and ham, and that. Sir Henry Tempest said I was not to stint 'em."

"I like partridge pie," said Master Cheese, as he seated himself before it, his mouth watering. "I have not tasted one this season. Do you happen to have a drop of bottled ale, Tynn?"

"I'll fetch a bottle," answered Tynn. "Is there anything else you'd like, sir?"

"What else is there?" asked Master Cheese. "Anything in the sweets line?"

"There's about a hundred baked plum-puddings. My wife has some custards, too, in her larder. The custards are not intended for out here, but you can have one."

Master Cheese wiped his damp face: he had gone all over into a glow of delight. "Bring a pudding and a custard or two, Tynn," said he. "There's nothing in the world half so nice as a plate of plum-pudding swimming in custard."

Tynn was in the act of supplying his wants, when a movement and a noise in the distance came floating on the air. Tynn dashed the dish of custards on the table, and ran like the rest. Everybody ran—except Master Cheese.

It was turning slowly into the grounds—the blue and silver carriage of the Verners, its four horses prancing under their studded harness. Lionel and his wife of a few days descended from it, when they found themselves in the midst of this unexpected crowd. They had cause, those serfs, to shout a welcome to their lord; for never again would they live in a degrading position, if he could help it. The various improvements for their welfare, which he had so persistently and hopefully planned, were not only begun, but nearly ended.

Sir Henry clasped Lucy's sweet face to his own bronzed one, pushing back her white bonnet to take his kiss from it. Then followed Lady Verner, then Decima, then Mary Elmsley. Lucy shook herself free, and laughed.

"I don't like so many kisses all at once," said she.

Lionel was everywhere. Shaking hands with old Mr. Bitterworth, with the Miss Wests, with Sir Edmund Hautley, with Lord Garle, with the Countess of Elmsley, with all that came in his way. Next he looked round upon a poorer class; and the first hand taken in his was Robin Frost's. By-and-by he encountered Jan.

"Well, Jan, old fellow!" said he, his affection shining out in his earnest, dark-blue eyes, "I am glad to be with you again. Is Cheese here?"

"He came," replied Jan. "But where he has disappeared to, I can't tell."

"Please, sir, I see him just now in an alcove," interposed Dan Duff, addressing Lionel.

"And how are you, Dan?" asked Lionel, with his kindly smile. "Saw Mr. Cheese in an alcove, did you?"

"It was that one," responded Dan, extending his finger in the direction of a spot not far distant. "He was tucking in at a pie. I see him, please sir."

"I must go to him," said Lionel, winding his arm within Jan's, and proceeding in the direction of the alcove. Master Cheese started up when surprised at his feast.

"It's only a little bit I'm tasting," said he, apologetically, "against it's time to begin. I hope you have come back well, sir,"

"Taste away, Cheese," replied Lionel, with a laugh, as he cast his eyes on some remaining fragments. "Partridge pie! do you like it?"

"Like it?" returned Master Cheese, tears coming into his eyes. "I wish I could be where I should have nothing else for a whole week."

"The first week's holiday you get at Bartholomew's, you must come and pay Verner's Pride a visit, and we will keep you supplied. Mrs. Verner will be glad to see you."

Master Cheese gave a great gasp. The words seemed too good to be real.

"Do you mean it, sir?" he asked.

"Of course I mean it," replied Lionel. "I owe you a debt, you know. But for your having blown yourself and the room up, I might not now be in possession of Verner's Pride. You come and spend a week with us when you can."

"That's glorious, and I'm much obliged to you, sir," said Master Cheese, in an ecstasy. "I think I'll have just another custard on the strength of it."

Jan was imperturbable—he had seen too much of Master Cheese for any display to affect him—but Lionel laughed heartily as they left the gentleman and the alcove. How well he looked—Lionel! The indented line of pain had gone from his brow; he was as a man at rest within.

"Jan, I feel truly glad at the news sent to us a day or two ago!" he exclaimed, pressing his brother's arm. "I always feared you would not marry. I never thought you would marry one as desirable as Mary Elmsley."

"I don't think I'd have had any one else," answered Jan. "I like her; always did like her; and if she has taken a fancy to me, and doesn't mind putting up with a husband that's called out at all hours, why—it's all right."

"You will not give up your profession, Jan?"

"Give up my profession?" echoed Jan, in surprise, staring with all his eyes at Lionel. "What should I do that for?"

"When Mary shall be Lady Mary Verner, she may be for wishing it."

"No she won't," answered Jan. "She knows her wishing it would be of no use. She marries my profession as much as she marries me. It is all settled. Lord Elmsley makes it a point that I take my degree, and I don't mind doing that to please him. I shall be a hard-working doctor always, and Mary knows it."

"Have you taken Belvidere House?"

"I intend to take it. Mary likes it, and I can afford it, with her income joined to mine. If she is a lady, she's not a fine

one," added Jan, "and I shall be just as quiet and comfortable as I have been in the old place. She says she'll see to the housekeeping and to my shirts, and——"

Jan stopped. They had come up with Lady Verner and Mary Elmsley. Lionel spoke laughingly.

"So Jan is appreciated at last!"

Lady Verner lifted her hands with a deprecatory movement. "It took me three whole days before I could believe it," she gravely said. "Even now, there are times when I think Mary must be playing with him."

Lady Mary shook her head with a blush and a smile. Lionel took her on his arm, and walked away with her.

"You cannot think how happy it has made me and Lucy. We never thought Jan was, or could be, appreciated."

"He was by me. He is worth—shall I tell it you, Lionel?—more than all the rest of Deerham put together. Yourself included."

"I will endorse the assertion," answered Lionel. "I am glad you are going to have him."

"I would have had him, had he asked me, years ago," candidly avowed Lady Mary.

"I was inquiring of Jan, whether you would not wish him to give up his profession. He was half offended with me for suggesting it."

"If Jan could ever be the one to lead an idle, useless life, I think half my love for him would die out," was her warm answer. "It was Jan's practical industry, his way of always doing the right in straightforward simplicity, that I believe first won me to like him. This world was made to work in; the next for rest—as I look upon it, Lionel. I shall be prouder of being wife to the surgeon, Jan Verner, than I should be had I married a duke's eldest son."

"He is to take his degree, he says."

"I believe so: but he will practise generally all the same—just as he does now. I do not care that he should become Dr. Verner: it is papa."

"If he—— Why, who can they be?"

Lionel Verner's interrupted sentence and question of surprise were caused by the appearance of some singular-looking forms who were stalking into the grounds. Poor, stooping, miserable, travel-soiled objects, looking fit for nothing but the workhouse. A murmur of astonishment burst from all present when they were recognized. It was Grind and his family, who had gone off with the Mormons, returned now in humility and poverty.

"Why, Grind, can it be you?" exclaimed Lionel, gazing with pity at the man's despairing aspect.

He, poor meek Grind, not less meek and civil than of yore, sat down upon a bench and burst into tears. They gathered round him in crowds, while he told his tale. How they had, after innumerable hardships on the road, too long to recite then, after losing some of their party by death, two of his children being amongst them—how they had at length reached Salt Lake City, so gloriously depicted by Brother Jarrum. And what did they find? Instead of an abode of peace and plenty, of luxury, of immunity from work, they found misery and discomfort. Things were strange to them, and they were strange in turn. He'd describe it all another time, he said; but it was quite enough to tell them what it was, by saying that he resolved to come away if possible, and face again the hardships of the way, though it was only to die in the old land, than he'd stop in it. Brother Jarrum was an awful impostor, so to have led them away!

"Wasn't there no saints?" breathlessly asked Susan Peckaby, who had elbowed herself to the front.

"Saints!" echoed Grind. "Yes, saints indeed! An iniquitous ill-doing, sensitive lot. I'd starve on a crust here, sooner than I'd stop among 'em. Villains!"

Poor Grind probably substituted the word "sensitive" for another, in his limited acquaintance with the English language. Susan Peckaby seemed to resent this new view of things. She was habited in the very plum-coloured gown which had been prepared for the start, the white paint having been got out of it by some mysterious process, perhaps by the turpentine suggested by Chuff. It looked tumbled and crinkled, the beauty altogether gone out of it. Her husband, Peckaby, stood behind, grinning.

"Villains, the saints was, was they?" said he.

"They was villains," emphatically answered Grind.

"And the saintesses?" continued Peckaby. "What of them?"

"The less said about 'em the better," responded Grind. "We should give 'em another name over here. I had to leave my eldest girl behind me," he added, lifting his face in pitying appeal to Mr. Verner's. "She wasn't but fifteen, and one of the men took her, and she's his thirteenth wife."

"I say, Grind," put in the sharp voice of Mrs. Duff, "what's become of Nancy, who lived up here?"

"She died on the road," he answered. "She married Brother Jarrum in New York——"

"Married Brother Jarrum in New York!" interrupted Polly Dawson, tartly. "You are asleep, Grind. It was Mary Green who married him. Leastways, news that she did come back to us here."

"He married 'em both," answered Grind. "The consequence of

which was, that the two took to quarrelling perpetual. It was nothing but snarling and fighting. Nancy again Mary, and Mary again her. We had nothing else with 'em all the way to the Salt Lake City, and Nancy got ill. Some said 'twas pining; some said 'twas a in'ard complaint as took her; some said 'twas the hardships killed her; cold, and fatigue, and bad food, and starvation. Anyhow, Nancy died."

"And what became of Mary?" rather more meekly inquired Mrs. Peckaby.

"She's Jarrum's wife still. He has about six of 'em out there. Yes; they *be* saints with a vengeance!"

"They're as bad off as the saintesses," interrupted Mrs. Grind. "They has their own way, the saints, and the saintesses don't. Regular cowed down the saintesses be; they daredn't say as their right hand's their own. That poor sick lady as went with us, Miss Kitty Baynton—and none on us thought she'd live to get there, but she did, and one of the saints chose her—she came to us just afore we got away, and said she wanted to write a letter to her mother to tell her how unhappy she was, fit to die with it. But she knowed the letter could never be got to her in England, cause letters ain't allowed to leave the city, and she must stop in misery for her life, she said; for she couldn't never undertake the journey back again, even if she could get clear away; it would kill her. But she'd like her mother to know how them Mormons deceived with their tales, and what sort of a place New Jerusalem was."

Grind turned again to Lionel.

"It is just blasphemy, sir, for them to say what they do. calling it the holy city, and the New Jerusalem. Couldn't they be stopped at it, and from deluding poor ignorant people here with their tales?"

"The only way of stopping it is for people to take their tales for what they are worth," said Lionel.

Grind gave a groan. "People is credulous, sir, when they think they are going to better themselves. Sir," he added, with a yearning, pleading look, "could I have a bit of work again upon the old estate, just to keep us from starving? I shan't want much now: to live here upon the soil will be enough, after having been at that Salt Lake City. It's a day's wonder, and would take a day to tell, the way we stole away from it, and how we at last got home."

"You shall have work, Grind, as much as you can do," quietly answered Lionel. "Work, and a home, and—I hope—plenty. If you will go there"—pointing to the tables—"with your wife and children, you will find something to eat and drink."

Grind clasped his hands in an attitude of thankfulness, his tears still streaming. They had walked from Liverpool.

"What about the ducks, Grind?" called out one of the Dawsons "Did you get 'em in abundance?"

Grind turned his haggard face round.

"I never saw a single duck the whole time I stopped there. If ducks were there, we didn't see 'em."

"And what about the white donkeys, Grind? added Peckaby. "Are *they* in plenty?"

Grind was ignorant of the white donkey story, and took the question literally. "I never saw none," he repeated. "There's nothing white there but the Great Salt Lake, which strikes the eyes with blindness——"

"Won't I treat you to a basting!"

The emphatic remark, coming from Mrs. Duff, caused a diversion, especially agreeable to Susan Peckaby. The unhappy Dan, in some mysterious manner, had torn the sleeve of his new jacket to ribbons. He sheltered himself from wrath behind Chuff the blacksmith, and the company began to pour in a stream towards the tables.

The sun had sunk in the west when Verner's Pride was left in quiet: the gratified feasters, Master Cheese included, having wended their way homeward. Lionel was with his wife at the window of her dressing-room, where he had formerly stood with Sibylla. The rosy hue of the sky played upon Lucy's face. Lionel watched it as he stood with his arm around her. Lifting her eyes suddenly, she saw how grave his looked, as they were bent upon her.

"What are you thinking of, Lionel.

"Of you, my darling. Standing with you here in our own home, feeling that you are mine at last; that nothing, except the hand of Death, can part us, I can scarcely yet believe in my great happiness."

Lucy raised her hand, and drew his face down to hers. "I can," she whispered. "It is very real."

"Ay, yes! it is real," he said, his tone almost painfully intense. "God be thanked! But we waited. Lucy, *how* we waited for it!"

THE END.

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